

BETTER SCHOOLS AND MORE SOCIAL MOBILITY

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I welcome the opportunity to speak at this important CBI Conference on public services. Your valuable report on the next steps in improving public services sets out key commitments which seemed to us in the Shadow Cabinet to be a very good basis for moving forward. Later in the speech I will set out some proposals which match your thinking very closely.

There are many powerful reasons why education matters so much in a modern society. Above all schools can transmit a body of knowledge, and above all valuable intellectual skills from one generation to the next. These are worthwhile in themselves, regardless of any economic benefit. To read Wordsworth or understand DNA is quite simply a good thing in itself. This is the enduring importance of education – sustaining culture, knowledge and enlightenment.

There is the economic argument as well. This is not simply the challenge of globalisation. The evidence shows that when it comes to the wages of individual workers, it is skill based technological change – SBTC – which has been far more important. Developments in IT, for example, have helped skilled workers improve their output faster than less skilled workers. As a result, the gap between the earnings of the skilled and the unskilled has risen by 1.7% a year for the past 20 years. Returns to education have risen which means that, as the CBI might remind us, the penalty for a poor education has become more severe and good education is more important than ever.

This leads to the third reason why education matters and it is the one I want to focus on today. Good education available for all helps achieve social mobility. Benjamin Franklin was describing something very special about America when he called it a “*land of opportunity.*” It was a bold new political argument. But gradually and messily European countries have tried to live up to the same ideal. In a specialised economy people have to go to the tasks

they are best at. A system based on class, heredity, or favours to tribes and clans is just too wasteful. What's more, it is plain wrong.

What has happened to social mobility?

Opportunity and mobility are key watchwords in British politics. But whilst we politicians bandy these words about, meanwhile, under our noses, we appear to have been going backwards. The evidence comes from economists such as Paul Gregg and Jo Blanden. They compare two cohorts born in 1958 and 1970. They worked out the chances of your being trapped in poverty if you were born in the bottom twenty per cent in either of those two years. They found that between 1958 and 1970 the chances of those low income kids getting stuck in the bottom fifth rose from 31% to 36% whilst their chance of making it to the top quintile fell from 19% to 16%.

Those stark figures, first released in 2001, exploded our complacent belief that British society is inexorably becoming more socially mobile. What can explain these figures? Some people believe it is because of the closure of the grammar schools. It is an important argument that I will turn to later. But there is another explanation.

The 1980s saw a big expansion in higher education. When the 1958 cohort went to university in 1976, there were 200,000 students. By the time the 1970 cohort went to university in 1988, this had risen by 60% to about 350,000 university students.

Middle-class parents used to be far more interested in the education of their sons than their daughters. For the 1958 cohort the middle 60% of the population sent almost twice as many of their sons as their daughters to education, as shown in research by Steve Machin and Anna Vignoles. But the sons and daughters born in 1970 went to university in equal numbers. So during the 1980s the proportion of middle-class women going to university nearly tripled, from 6% to 15%. However, the proportion of women from the bottom 20% of the income range getting to university did not increase at all - it stayed flat at just 6%. This opened up a new social divide in Britain between daughters of middle income and low income families. The expansion of higher education was a good thing but it might have had the perverse effect of reducing social mobility by increasing the significance of differences in school standards. Having gone to a good school started to matter more for young women who were now

candidates for university. Narrowing the educational divide between middle-income men and women opened up a wider social divide between them and poorer families. Well educated women tend to marry well educated men and both go on to earn more than people without a university education so this also made the distribution of income across British families more unequal.

The data for children born in 1958 and 1970 might therefore be telling us about the 1980s, the crucial decade when women's opportunities in higher education caught up with men's. A lot has happened since these cohorts were in education. We are like astronomers staring at the light from a long-dead star. The school reforms of the 1980s and 90s should have helped reverse the effects of the progressive educational fashions of the 1960's and 70's. That would make the experience of the 1970 cohort a low point after which social mobility recovered. But even that would only be taking us back to where we were before. It would be nowhere near good enough.

School standards and social mobility

I know from talking to many deeply committed teachers how satisfying is for them to open up opportunities for a child from a deprived background which otherwise would have passed that child by. But the uncomfortable truth is that our schools are not still spreading educational opportunities, they are entrenching social advantage.

We have tracked down what happens to the educational attainment of children from poor families on free school meals. As they go through school the attainment gap between them and the rest of schoolchildren doesn't get narrower it gets steadily wider. When pupils begin at primary school the children on free school meals are 19 percentage points behind the rest in their performance in key Stage 1 tests. At the end of primary school this has widened to 21 percentage points. Then the transition to secondary school, perhaps the crucial moment, causes them to fall yet further behind and by the time they have reached the age of 14 the gap is 26 percentage points. Children on free school meals are 28 percentage points behind the rest when it comes to GCSE results. It is very hard to see how colleges, universities or employers can spread opportunity and social mobility when this enormous gap in achievement has opened up at school.

The Government boasts about the big increase in the number of students getting GCSEs or equivalents. But many of the extra qualifications are in GCSE equivalents or in new GCSEs which are far removed from the established core academic disciplines. The percentage of children getting five A* to C GCSE's including English, Science, Maths and a modern language has actually declined since 1997. Meanwhile, the crunchier subjects, the ones which universities really value, are increasingly the preserve of private schools. 7% of schoolchildren are in private schools. Yet figures I have obtained in Parliamentary Answers show that about 48% of 'A' levels in individual sciences are taken in private schools. 64% of modern languages 'A' levels are taken in private schools. These are the 'A' levels which help get you through to the top universities. The Government's culture of targets, points, and league tables has pushed state schools to treat GCSEs and also 'A' levels as all of equal value. But this is not how universities see them so new barriers to social mobility are erected. Gordon Brown has talked about increasing spending on state school pupils so it matches spending in the private sector. But we should have a different and more important ambition. We ought to raise them to the same standards in the same subjects.

Some say it is the abolition of grammar schools which explains what has been happening to social mobility. But the loss of grammar schools was just part of a deeper problem as traditional pedagogy lost out to progressive teaching fads that let down a generation of children. There is an ironic twist to all this. Progressive teaching methods were pursued by middle-class educationalists who believed that they were going to transform the educational opportunities of children from poor backgrounds. But research by Tom Loveless in the USA shows that experimental teaching methods – many of which had no rigorous basis in child development or education science – were tried out first in poor areas. Meanwhile, the middle classes kept them out of their own schools in the more prosperous areas. Just as middle-class professionals stayed in their terraced houses whilst building tower blocks for the masses, so by and large they kept their children in schools with traditional teaching methods, even while imposing a very different pedagogy on others. This is why evaluation of education initiatives is so important – it would have stopped the destructive fashions of the 1960s and 70s in their tracks.

Those progressive fashions are slowly being reversed. Tried and tested pedagogical techniques such as synthetic phonics are now making a comeback. Whole class teaching is coming back as well - though I am shocked by the number of occasions I visit schools and see

children sitting on the floor as the layout of the furniture is such that whole class teaching can only be delivered by getting them off their chairs altogether. There is a legitimate role for Government in evaluating best practice and trying to spread it. We can't treat teachers like automatons obeying our commands. The teaching profession will respond to this evidence. I am confident that working with them we can raise educational standards in the classroom.

A Conservative Government will focus remorselessly on educational standards But Tony Blair was wrong to imply that you can focus on raising standards without the right structures. Now Gordon Brown is making the same mistake. I don't want to see yet more unnecessary reorganisation of schools. But we do need to identify reforms which will lead to higher standards. Given the seriousness of the failure to improve social mobility in our country we have to focus in particular on education reforms that improve opportunities for children from modest backgrounds on our tough estates.

Is selection the answer?

Many people, genuinely worried about social mobility, believe that grammar schools can transform the opportunities of bright children from poor areas. For those children from modest backgrounds who do get to grammar schools the benefits are enormous. And we will not get rid of those grammar schools that remain. But the trouble is that the chances of a child from a poor background getting to a grammar school in those parts of the country where they do survive are shockingly low. Just 2% of children at grammar schools are on free school meals when those low income children make up 12% of the school population in their areas.

Perhaps I can just pause for a moment and reflect on this evidence. Why are grammar schools and other excellent secondary schools no longer the vehicles for progress for bright children from poor backgrounds that they probably used to be? I look back on my own experience as the beneficiary of an excellent and free education at a direct grant grammar school. I remember sitting in the rows of desks to do the 11 plus from my typical local primary school in Birmingham. Class sizes were much bigger than they are now - there were 48 in my class. But teaching 48 of us then was probably no tougher than teaching 30 children today. We were pretty well behaved. I believe most of us lived with both of our parents. We had what were then called immigrants from the West Indies in the class but they

all spoke English as their main language. Nobody got any special favours and nobody dreamt of special tuition or anything like that. With some imperfections the 11 plus probably did sort out children who could best benefit from going to grammar school. But it only worked because all of us across Birmingham had fairly similar personal and family experiences.

Now 40 years later, the experiences children have had by the age of 11 are so different that it is a fantasy that you can somehow fairly distinguish between them at that age. We all talk about family breakdown as if somehow it is evenly spread. We are not being honest with ourselves. The evidence assembled so powerfully by Iain Duncan-Smith's Social Justice Commission, is that poorer families are far more fragile. Meanwhile, middle-class parents invest far more effort in raising their kids than they did a generation ago. My parents didn't spend time driving me around to tennis coaching or music lessons (and I didn't love them any the less for that). Nowadays, middle-class kids get all that and more, and probably extra tuition to help them do well in the exams at 11. This growing difference between families is a theme to which I will return in a speech next month.

This is one of the problems for the 1970 cohort. Dr. Leon Feinstein measured the basic cognitive abilities of young children aged 22 months and tracked what happened to them. He found that the cognitive skills of a low ability child from a high income background gradually improved relative to the performance of a high ability child from a low income background. If you think of this as two curves, the performance of the high ability low income child declines while the performance of the low ability high income child improves. The two curves cross over long before the age of 11.

If the evidence were different and if grammar schools could still work as they might once have done, transforming the opportunities of many children from poor backgrounds then we would be obliged to look very seriously at the case for their introduction. But the fact is that grammar schools don't any longer work like that. It is not because grammar schools have somehow turned bad or sold out: it is because they operate in a very different environment. Serious reform has to take account of these economic and social changes.

This does not just affect grammar schools. The Sutton Trust have looked at the best performing 200 state secondary schools excluding grammar schools measured by

performance in the conventional league tables of academic results. Again, our best performing non-selective comprehensive schools have a much lower percentage of children on free school meals than in their area. In the areas where the best 200 comprehensives are located 12% of children are on free school meals. In those schools themselves it is 6%. This gap is particularly wide for schools that have control over their own admissions. It challenges the conventional wisdom about the role of catchment areas. If our best secondary schools were representative of their catchment areas then they would have a much more socially diverse student body than they do. Tony Blair didn't go to No. 10 Downing Street, to get into the catchment area for the London Oratory.

There are some exceptions to this pattern. Our best performing non-selective state schools where the local authority controls the admissions, are representative of their areas. 5% of the students are on free school meals roughly matching the proportion in their area, where there are 6% of children on free school meals. But, as the national average for free school meals is 15% we can see they are located in areas which are themselves prosperous and middle-class. Overall the evidence about our secondary schools at the top of the academic league tables is clear. They either control their own admissions in which case their intake is not representative of their area, or the local authority controls their admissions policies, in which case they may be representative of the area but it is going to be a good area.

Simon Burgess and Adam Briggs have also analysed the various likelihoods of your going to your nearest school depending on how good the school is and whether you are on free school meals. The evidence is overwhelming. Children from poorer families are more likely than average to end up at their local school if it is very bad and less likely to end up there if it is very good. Their research shows poor children are half as likely to go to good academic schools as other children.

This dense inter-connection of family investment and access to good schooling lies behind our low social mobility. It shows that the abolition of grammar schools and the creation of comprehensives failed to spread opportunities in the way that was hoped. But equally giving schools powers over their own admissions has not spread opportunity either. We have to do better.

David Cameron has made it absolutely clear that one of the highest priorities for a future Conservative Government is to spread opportunity and social mobility more widely in Britain. That means more children having a chance of getting to good schools . There are three main options for doing this. Let's look at them in turn.

Controlling admissions

The first approach, taken by this Government, is to try to get more and more control over school admissions policies. A National Admissions Code was first introduced in 1988 as part of the Thatcher Government's education reforms to empower parents to choose schools, not schools to choose pupils. But it has gradually become more and more detailed – it now stretches to 132 pages. I understand the need for an admissions code given the evidence about how schools use their powers on admissions. But there are commonsense limits to what you can do. You can't micro-manage the admissions policies of 20,000 schools. You can't have a Government Inspector sitting on the shoulder of the admissions panel as they decide individual cases. As with all central plans, government finds itself embroiled in very tricky ethical issues. Can you give preference to the children of your teachers to make life much easier for them, or is that social selection? Can you give preference to siblings in a partially selective school, or does that spread social selection too? The trouble is that the admissions code is a device for allocating a fixed number of places at good schools. It fails to get to the root of the problem. What we need is more good school places in total. It would be so much better if the whole issue of which school your child was admitted to became rather less life-shapingly fraught for so many parents.

Vouchers

If the Government's approach is to try to fix schools' admissions policies from above there is another approach which appears to have great appeal because it trusts parents – introduce school vouchers. The idea is to empower parents to choose the good schools by giving them direct spending power. There is a subtle, and more attractive form of a voucher in which you adjust the spending power for the social background of the student so that children from a poor area have, if you like, a higher price on their head. If a parent's request for their child to get to the school of their choice is written on the back of a cheque to pay for it then the letter is going to get far more attention. This is a powerful and important argument. We do

need to go further towards clearer, more predictable per capita funding of pupils, aimed particularly at the poorer children being let down at the moment.

Ever since the Greenwich judgement, more than 20 years ago, local authorities have not been able to run little protectionist autarchies and only educate children from their own local authority areas. There are significant cross-boundary flows already. Indeed, it is one reason why, as we have already seen, the best schools aren't actually representative of their catchment areas. We already have more per capita funding than in the past and we officially have a system of school choice. But it hasn't transformed educational standards as we hoped. This is because there are no mechanisms in place to enable successful schools to expand, to take over failing schools or for new schools to be created. This explains why school choice, which has done wonders for educational attainment in Sweden, The Netherlands, and some parts of the United States, has not had the same impact here.

Every MP must have had the experience of a parent turning up at a surgery saying that they had chosen the best school for their child but had then been told that the school wasn't able to let the child in. Suddenly a politician's promise of choice has degenerated into a mere chance to express a preference. If we simply issued vouchers for an unreformed education system, that problem would be repeated in spades. It is as if we were lovingly focusing on the details of exactly what free railway tickets we should hand out to people without tackling the problem that the trains people want to take are full to bursting already, health and safety regulations make it very hard to add extra carriages and planning rules obstruct the building of new track. It is the failure to open up the supply side which is the reason why, despite years of ambitious attempts at education reform, Britain now lags behind many other advanced western countries.

There is a direct parallel here with Gordon Brown's failure with public services. Too much of the extra money he has put in has gone in higher costs and not enough in extra provision of a higher quality. The reason is, again, that there has been no reform of the supply side. The frustrated chooser with a voucher that they cannot spend at the school of their choice, and the frustrated spender who throws money at schools but without big improvements are both examples of the same failure to confront the need for genuine reform.

I don't believe we can go any further down the Government's route of trying to get even greater control over individual schools' admissions policies. Nor do I believe that handing out education vouchers in an unreformed schools system genuinely empowers parents because it is so hard for schools to respond to their preferences. The crucial step is not to focus on the demand side but on the supply side. We have already got parents who want to choose and a significant amount of public money that would follow them. Indeed, the latest evidence is of more parents appealing against admission decisions than ever before. What we haven't created are the mechanisms to provide more of the good schools that they want to choose. We must make it easier for people, including parents themselves, to set up new schools. New school providers must be able to enter the maintained sector, responding to what parents want. This is not how the system works at the moment.

More Good Schools

Brighton got into the headlines recently because of its proposal to introduce a lottery for allocating places to secondary schools. It had a small number of popular over-subscribed secondary schools and other secondary schools that parents didn't want to send their children to. No admissions code and voucher system alters the fact that within the current model you are playing a zero sum game – for every parent who gains there is another who loses. What Brighton needs, just like other towns across the country, is more good schools places. So it's an irony that there was an attempt in Brighton to allow a popular Montessori primary school to enter the maintained sector only for the application to be turned down. Everyone mocked John Prescott when he said *'if you set up a school and it becomes a good school, the great danger is that everyone wants to go there.'* But that wasn't a joke, it was an accurate account of how the current regime operates. The official Government adjudicator actually turned down the Brighton Montessori school on the grounds that it *'might prove attractive to more local families who might indeed find places to be available.'*

The single most important reason why we backed Tony Blair's Education Act was that he recognised that the crucial thing was to make it easier for new schools to enter the maintained sector. It is why he proposed, for example, that no new schools should be created by local authorities – a powerful device for bringing new providers incrementally into the maintained sector. It is a tragedy for British education that Tony Blair only grasped this at the very end of his time in office when his power and authority were ebbing away. Now the question is

which Party has the imagination to carry forward this agenda: the Labour Party under Gordon Brown which rebelled en masse against those Education Bill proposals – or the Conservative Party under David Cameron? I believe the mantle of education reform now falls on our shoulders.

At the heart of our education reforms is creating, in Tony Blair's words, '*self-governing independent state schools*'. This involves a lot of painstaking work getting rid of the barriers that stand in the way of much greater and more diverse provision of schools in this country. It means making it easier for successful schools to take over failing schools. It means making it much easier to create new schools including by parents groups themselves if they wish. It means making it easier for new providers of education to enter the maintained sector without facing barriers to entry. It particularly means applying these initiatives to the parts of the country which suffer the most from the blocked opportunities and life chances of a low mobility society. You will hear more from us about this in the months ahead. But let me give an outline of our approach today.

The evidence earlier showed that good secondary schools are almost all, in their different ways, socially highly selective. I missed out one type of school with a long track record of success. These schools have excellent results and take a high percentage of children from poor backgrounds. They are City Technology Colleges. There is still a gap between the social background of the children at the school and the area in which it is located. Nevertheless, these schools, because they are in some of our most deprived areas, offered a better chance of a child from a poor background getting a good education than any other model we have looked at so far. 14% of their students are on free school meals, more than double the rate in any other of our well established top performing schools. This is still behind the rate in these areas – an extraordinary 26% - but that shows they are very poor parts of the country. CTCs were of course introduced by the last Conservative Government and we can take pride in what they have achieved. Although Tony Blair has not created any more CTCs, he has introduced the Academies, a diluted version of these CTCs. They don't have quite as many freedoms as CTCs enjoy. In fact in the rush to create more and more Academies before Gordon Brown becomes leader, there is a danger that they are becoming less distinctive. But so far the evidence is that Academies are very popular with parents and doing better than the schools they have replaced. And the evidence is that the first set of Academies had an extraordinary 40% of pupils eligible for free school meals, higher than the

31% of pupils on free schools in the areas where they are located. They are doing well in very difficult circumstances. They show that proper academic rigour should never just be reserved for the leafy suburbs and for prosperous families. We in the Conservative Party back them wholeheartedly.

The challenge now is to use legislation left us by Tony Blair to drive forward real education reform. He has created, in Academies, a new legal entity whose potential has not been fully realised. All other schools in the maintained sector are covered by detailed regulations from the Department for Education and local authorities. Academies are financed out of public money through a direct contract between the Department for Education and the Academy. The Academy only needs to comply with the terms of the contract. This specifies as much or as little of what the Government wants an Academy to do. We can use the academy programme far more ambitiously to tackle supply side problems that have stood in the way of real school reform in this country. We will not just stand behind the Academies already created, we will push Tony Blair's Academies Programme further and faster. In fact, I believe that the measures I am proposing today are necessary to reach Tony Blair's target of four hundred Academies.

If new Academies are to succeed and show how things can be done better and differently in education, then nobody must be able to argue that it is only because they have selected the students that are easiest to educate or got away with extra money. Proper scrutiny, fair admissions and fair funding are essential. We therefore have five proposals, on which we welcome the views of everyone in the world of education and beyond.

Policy Proposals

The starting point for our approach is making it simpler to open a new school within the maintained sector. Currently there are too many barriers in their way, not just for academies but for other types of school as well. It might be groups of parents or teachers or education charities that want to set up a new school. But the obstacles they face, such as planning controls, are a big problem. So is the new rule that a school has to be fully up and staffed before it can be assessed for entering the maintained sector. We are committed to making it easier for parents and others to create new schools if that is what they wish. But there is one particular constraint holding back academies which forms my second proposal.

The requirement of an outside sponsor to put forward £2m as a contribution has caught up Academies in the mire of the cash for honours scandal. This is unfair on the philanthropists who have contributed to Academies in the past. If donors wish to give money to Academies that is something for which they should be applauded. But there should no longer be any requirement for a contribution from an external donor on these lines as a prerequisite for creating an Academy.

The Government's new model contract makes clear the contribution from donors is no longer aimed at meeting the capital costs of the Academy, but at establishing an endowment fund for the Academy. It is additional to what is required for building and running the Academy. Whilst clearly desirable, it is not essential to its success; Government would not need to make up the difference. As it happens a number of our existing Academies are doing very well but my recent research has shown they have yet to see any money from their backers. The reason why Academies work is not because they have more money, it is because they have the benefit of extra freedoms and managerial support from the sponsoring educational organisations.

There are already organisations such as the United Learning Trust, the Woodard Trust and the City Livery Companies which have an historic involvement in education and which are ideal candidates to manage and to run the Academies. What matters far more than the £2m is allowing these and other excellent education organisations to come in and run Academies. Indeed the need to find a donor to endow each school before they start can be a significant barrier to their creating the academies and raising educational standards. One excellent educational charity, the Oasis Trust, which is keen to run Academies, says, *'we are constrained, not by our ability to run education, but by a capacity to deliver the money.'*

Academies would still need a sponsor who would drive the creation of the new schools and help ensure they are well run. But the contribution they make can be purely educational – there would be no requirement for £2m of funding. We want to see a wide range of sponsors and we are removing a barrier to this. Academies are of course charities, sponsors do not make a profit from academies, and academies don't charge fees – none of this would change.

This brings me on to my third proposal. For too long education has suffered from the cottage industry fallacy - the belief that the future is for an individual school entirely managing itself. That is one model - I have no objection to Academies that are run that way. But if we really want to drive rapid and ambitious educational change we have to look at other models. Many schools don't want to run all of their own administrative and financial affairs and they value being part of a wider group. It is one reason why I don't want to drive local authorities out of education. But the local authority is only one way of delivering this and geography is only one possible connection between schools. We need to go much further and encourage other ways of bringing schools together. Someone once described the Girls Day School Trust which brings together about 30 independent girls' schools as the ideal LEA because it carries out functions which schools don't want to do themselves. The United Learning Trust is another example of this model. So far the academy Programme has been used very much as an example of school by school reform. On closely scrutinising the legal framework for Academies I conclude there is nothing in the law which requires that an Academy be a single school. As Secretary of State for Education I would wish to negotiate contracts within the framework of current Academy legislation with outside providers to run networks of schools across the country. We could contract with an educational charity or company as an academy to run say ten or twenty schools. A multi-school academy would cut out the cumbersome process of negotiating contracts one by one, and make it much easier for new regional and national organisations offering a consistent brand of state education to emerge. They would have the same charitable status as existing academies.

My fourth proposal is to use the Academy programme to implement the tried and tested ways of teaching which parents value. I believe that whole class teaching, setting and streaming, and a robust discipline policy are very effective ways to improve standards. They have persisted for centuries and they are still used with tremendous success in the independent sector. We can put these requirements into new contracts for academies. As Secretary of State I would use my power to fund some Academy providers who commit themselves in their contracts to run schools with a traditional way of teaching. We would bring those tried and tested teaching methods to schools in the heart of our inner cities, as some Academies are already doing. That is the real way to improve social mobility.

This approach on its own does, however, raise serious questions. I am a layman, not an educationalist. What evidence do I have to back my beliefs? Why should teachers outside

academies have to comply with such instructions on their pedagogy? We can respond to these understandable concerns by serious empirical research. The Academy provider would agree to stick with these teaching methods for, say, five years so we could collect data from these tests and by comparing the results to other similar schools, we could observe the impact made by these policies in a real, scientific manner. As it happens, I think that these policies would be very popular with parents. I suspect that we will find schools near these assessed schools will copy them in order to compete. Once the evidence is collected and properly analysed we will then be able to see whether these methods work and how. This needs to be done systematically and openly. It leads to my fifth and final proposal.

I referred earlier to the damage that changing educational fads have done to children's education and to those in the poorest areas in particular. We shouldn't stop all change. Innovation in education is a good thing. We should expect the teaching profession constantly to seek improvements in how we teach our children and for their best practice to spread. However, it is important to assess new ideas thoroughly and quantitatively. In the last few years – thanks in no small part to the personal commitment of my colleague Nick Gibb – we have largely won the battle over the use of synthetic phonics to teach reading. That victory was not an ideological or a political one – it was an intellectual one based on the use of carefully collected and analysed evidence. That should be the grown-up way we approach other debates in education too. The DfES already spends almost £30m on research with many millions more on consultants. We can spend that money better. But an idea of what is 'best practice' is hard to come by. Teachers are bombarded with suggestions, advice and guidance. We need independent research to rigorously sort through it, to work out what works best on a genuinely scientific and long-term basis and we need to tell teachers about what we have found so they can work out what would work best for their students, so they could stay on top of their game and live up to their professional status. We will arm teachers with the information they need so they can take responsibility for their pupils.

That is why we will consult the profession on a new approach to research, independent of Ministers, which evaluates educational innovation before it goes nationwide. Only then will we get proper respect for teachers as a profession whilst also giving a far more legitimate basis for Ministers and the Department to engage with the profession, drawing on evidence of what works.

Conclusion

The next Conservative Government can use Tony Blair's legislation to deliver the promise of Tony Blair's rhetoric – self-governing, independent state schools. It is a powerful route to higher standards with more good state schools and more social mobility. This agenda involves both parties moving from some of their traditional positions. Tony Blair has recognised that Labour's early attacks on grant maintained schools and his hostility towards structural reform was a mistake. As part of his legacy he now leaves behind him legislation which we can use to push his Academies much further forward than Gordon Brown would ever dare to do. However, the Conservative Party has had to change too. I have tried to set out in this speech the basis for that shift. We must break free from the belief that academic selection is any longer the way to transform the life chances of bright poor kids. This is a widespread belief but we just have to recognise that there is overwhelming evidence that such academic selection entrenches advantage, it does not spread it.

We are catching up with mainstream education reform in other advanced western countries. There is a clear pattern. In fact it is one of the new rules of public service reform - you can have diversity of supply provided that the new suppliers can't choose who they serve. Newcomers are treated with great suspicion if people will come in and cream off the children who are easiest to educate in order to appear to do well. We are all familiar with the lists of countries that have the boldest and most effective education reform - some American states, Holland and Sweden, for example. They all have more per capita funding and greater diversity of provision and without allowing providers to select who they teach. It is very important that we comply with this successful international model. It is what makes the new entrants genuinely open to all children rather than just an ingenious way of helping an elite to escape. Our reform must always rest on the key principles of fair funding and fair admissions.

Twenty years ago Britain was ahead of the field in reforming education. We are now lagging far behind and need to catch up. We will have the advantage of international evidence of what works and of how it works. It is a basis for real education reform. And it must above all help those children in our poorer areas let down by the educational fashions of the past, and suffering from blocked opportunities in a stagnant society. We can do so much better.

David Willetts MP

15th May 2007