

# New Left Education Policy Forum

## Early Years Development

This first section of our Policy Forum Document depends for its rationale on a simple proposition – that until and unless, as a society, we can secure the development and full potential of all our children, the aims of social justice cannot be met.

Children, together with old people and the sick, are the key beneficiaries of the Welfare State, and we still have reason to be proud of the achievements of the post-war Attlee Government.

But sixty years after the post-war settlement which established free secondary education, the National Health Service and which set the framework for children's welfare services, too many children are let down or failed by their environments, through poverty, ill-health, neglect and educational disadvantage.

The early years represent a critical period for development. Tests at 22 months reveal that, from this early age, children from poorer families start to follow a divergent path, which is consolidated in adulthood by the pervasive link between income and educational inequality.

New Labour has invested substantially in targeted initiatives – Sure Start Programmes, Neighbourhood Nurseries, Children's Centres – providing support and education for children and families in the most disadvantaged areas of the country. Adjustments to the tax and benefits system have reduced the numbers of children living in poverty. Early years programmes in deprived areas aim to change life for children in the longer term. In a number of ways - by enabling parents to work, by providing nursery education for children at risk of developmental delay, through advice and help with health and nutrition and by means of classes and discussion groups for parents – education and childcare become tools for regeneration and social justice.

Currently estimated at £4.3 billion a year, investment in early years' services has cost £14 billion since 1998. This has provided free nursery education for all three and four year olds, new childcare places, local Sure Start Programmes and Children's Centres in deprived areas.

At the same time, a range of measures, among them tax credits, have been introduced to stimulate an expanded market in childcare throughout the country as a whole.

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More recently, the DfES five-year plan set out a vision of a Children's Centre in every community combined with out-of-school care from age five, more opportunities for parents of under-twos to stay at home, 12.5 hours of flexible free 'educare' (currently positioned as free nursery education) and better support for all parents who want it with the bringing up of their children.

### ***The present reality***

The total realisation of this vision is still some way off. Inequalities in the distribution of childcare mean that the best performing local authority areas offer six times as many childcare places as do the lowest.

Currently, Sure Start initiatives are targeted mainly at those living in the 20% most deprived wards, reaching some, but by no means all, of the poorest families in the country. There is not yet sufficient information to make an assessment of the impact of local programmes on children's lives, but the preliminary findings are positive.

Outside those areas, many if not most families affected by poverty are not able to access the benefits of Sure Start Programmes, or to obtain a free or subsidised childcare place. Help with childcare costs, via the tax credit system, is available only where one or more parents are working. For many families work is not readily available, or previous limited employment experience, health or domestic circumstances make it impractical.

In all areas, childcare may be neither accessible nor affordable. In London, in particular, the average cost of childcare is significantly higher than in the rest of the country. Even with tax credits, childcare is unaffordable for many parents.

A recent study from the National Audit Office revealed the loss of 90,000 childcare places since 1998 and uncertain sustainability for current providers. The UK childcare infrastructure remains weak, characterised by low pay, lack of investment and with staff recruitment and retention problems.

### ***Building a Universal Service***

Currently, the only universal component of the childcare strategy is 12.5 hours of nursery education for 3-5 year olds – now positioned as 'educare'. A review of 21 European and English-speaking nations found a range of publicly-funded provision covering between 12.5 and 48 hours a week, the average being 32 hours per week.

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The Government has offered a longer term vision of affordable childcare, accessible to all, but, in the here and now, an incremental increase in the universal free element to 20 hours per week would make work a realistic possibility for parents today. For children under three, for whom there is currently no right to free childcare, the introduction of publicly funded provision could be used to take account of respite, learning or occupational factors.

The impact of these measures would be considerable. By altering the balance between universal and targeted measures, a much stronger childcare infrastructure would be better placed to serve the range of needs which exist in all communities.

An increase in publicly-funded provision of this nature would ensure that all families affected by poverty could access free childcare. Additional help with parenting, or opportunities to gain skills or qualifications, as part of the childcare offer, would help parents to move into paid employment as and when their children's needs make it appropriate for them to do so.

### ***Building a Culture of Empowerment***

The investment of resources is , however, just one component of the design of children's services. In other countries, for example Sweden, where high levels of welfare provision have been a longstanding feature of social policy, the need for a more holistic approach to the care and education of children has led to a rethinking of services.

Here in the UK, a foregrounding of similar issues has led to the development of *Sure Start*. The design of *Sure Start* is linked to research findings which have illuminated the importance of the family as a context for learning and the influences which transmit intergenerational success in education and in life generally. Evidence has also come forward relating to the wider benefits of learning in relation to health and well-being, employment status and social mobility. This has served to underline the potential of learning for families as a tool for regeneration and social inclusion.

The strategic value of *Sure Start* lies in the importance of the early years as a critical period both for child development and for the establishment of parenting practices. The degree of freedom granted to local Programmes has meant that, in a number of cases, the approach has been to work through a culture of empowerment, with parents involved in decision-making and taking paid jobs within the Programmes.

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Since the 1980s, education policy has rested increasingly on the freedom of schools to operate within “quasi-markets”, recasting parents and children as “educational consumers”. But constructing education, or health and welfare services, as an extension of consumer choice displaces an alternative concept of public provision, one that is organised on principles of solidarity and mutuality and is capable of offering opportunities for democratic participating to children and adults alike.

Of particular relevance to regeneration may be childcare initiatives which adopt or emphasise a social enterprise model, one that is actively engaged in intermediate labour market approaches, creating stable jobs for the local community within their programmes and transitional employment opportunities for others. Across Europe, the emergence of social enterprise has in many countries been associated with the development of co-operatives and other social forms of organisation to deliver childcare.

Within this model of operation, demarcation lines between staff and users are minimised and there is a fluid and developing pattern of learning opportunities and mutual self-help activities. The care and upbringing of children by parents requires skill and perseverance. Within this type of model there is encouragement for parents to realise the economic and vocational potential of these and other skills.

### ***Democratising services***

There are clear signs that the Government’s interest in an expanded early years and childcare service remains high.

Early years’ provision appears to offer value to a range of crossing-cutting objectives, from improving child development and raising school standards, to meeting the needs of the economy by improving skills, to combating poverty and promoting social inclusion, but most particularly in its potential to engage those most voiceless and disenfranchised by previous experiences of education.

Allowing users to determine the shape of services can be challenging. It is clear also that kick-starting the delivery of childcare, after years of policy neglect, has been more difficult than anticipated.

But public services offer us evidence of our citizenship. To be properly effective, they must not only be available to the most vulnerable members of society, but must also be open to influence and change and to offer democratic participation. This, together with the investment which is needed, is the challenge for a third-term Labour government.

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**Selection, Specialisation, the Threat of Privatisation and the Case for the Community School**

In a number of key respects, the education programme pursued by New Labour since its election victory in 1997 represents a clear continuation of the policies adopted by the Major Government between 1990 and 1997: the continued emphasis on school inspection and accountability; the continued dismantling of the National Curriculum, particularly at Key Stage Four; frequent recourse to the language of choice and diversity; a perceived need to involve the *private* sector in major aspects of *public* provision.

Speeches by leading politicians from the two main political parties and the two 2004 strategy documents – the Conservatives' *Right to Choose*, published at the end of June, and the Government's *Five-Year Strategy for Children and Learners*, published at the beginning of July – even share a liking for certain key phrases and clichés to give expression to politicians' fears and prejudices. We have actually reached the stage where the language used by Conservatives and New Labour politicians and policy-makers is more or less interchangeable, finding a prominent place for such tendentious statements as: 'greater personalisation and choice are at the heart of better public services and higher standards'; 'choice means greater diversity of provision and providers'; 'it is time to see an end to large "one-size-fits-all" state institutions', etc.

This section of our Policy Forum Document examines the *Five-Year Strategy* in the light of what it tells us about the Government's attitude towards choice and diversity, selection, specialisation and the privatisation of public services. It also looks at some of the long-term initiatives which could hold out prospects for improvement and progress.

The New Labour *Strategy* highlights an increase in the numbers of two types of school, specialist schools and city academies, as the chief means of enhancing choice and diversity in the secondary sector. The number of specialist schools and colleges has already increased from 196 when Labour came to power in 1997 to 1,955 in September 2004; and it is envisaged that there will be a further massive expansion over the next four years. The number of city academies – 17 in September 2004 – will have increased to 200 by the year 2010. And it is envisaged that 95 per cent of state secondary schools will be either specialist schools or city academies by the year 2008.

The Government's concern to promote choice and diversity at the secondary level, very clearly expressed in its July document, has to be seen in the context of its hostile attitude towards the idea of the comprehensive school so evident in

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the seven-year period since its 1997 victory. And this has been accompanied by a total refusal to contemplate the possibility of ending the selection procedures adopted by the 164 surviving grammar schools.

Back in 1995, while he was attempting to pacify a restless audience during a lively education debate at the October Labour Party Conference, David Blunkett made the now famous statement: 'Read my lips. No selection, either by examination or interview, under a Labour government.' It later transpired that what he had *meant* to say was 'no *further* selection', and this gave the statement a totally different meaning. The phrase 'no selection' meant an end to the existing grammar schools; 'no *further* selection' was, in effect, a guarantee of their retention.

Then on 12 March 2000, two days after the announcement of the voting figures in the Ripon ballot which guaranteed the future of Ripon Grammar School, Blunkett gave an interview to *The Sunday Telegraph* in which he said: 'I'm not interested in hunting the grammar schools. ... Arguments about selection are part of a past agenda.'

In a speech he gave to a group of modernising Labour activists in Bedfordshire (known as 'Progress') in September 2000, Tony Blair himself said that the debate about selection was part of the agenda of the 1960s and 1970s, and he attacked comprehensive schools for adopting a one-size-fits-all mentality – there was 'no banding or setting, uniform provision for all, hostility to the notion of specialisation and of "centres of excellence" within areas of the curriculum'.

In February 2001, the Prime Minister refused to distance himself from the claim made by his Communications Director Alastair Campbell that 'the day of the bog-standard comprehensive' was over. This was at the time of the publication of the 2001 Green Paper which Blair said was ushering in 'a post-comprehensive era'. From now on, according to Blair, everyone should note that 'promoting choice and diversity' was 'synonymous with raising standards and achieving results'.

Far from securing an *end* to eleven-plus selection, which means thousands of pupils being forced to attend second-class secondary modern schools, the Labour Government has actually presided over a large and continuing *increase* in the number of grammar-school places. According to statistics published in *The Times Educational Supplement* of 26 March 2004 and in *The Daily Telegraph* of 27 March 2004, there are now 150,750 grammar-school pupils in England, representing 4.6 per cent of the secondary school population, compared with 111,848 pupils, representing 3.8 per cent, ten years ago. This 35 per cent increase in places, caused solely by the expansion of existing grammar schools, is equivalent to the creation of 46 new selective schools.

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The emphasis on *specialisation* as part of the drive to promote choice and diversity is *not* a new phenomenon, but dates back to the early years of the Major administration. In July 1992, the then Education Secretary John Patten wrote an article for *New Statesman and Society* in which he argued that 'selection should not be a great issue for the 1990s as it was in the 1960s. The new S-word for all Socialists to come to terms with is "Specialisation"'.

The idea of 'selection by specialisation' has not endeared the specialist schools policy to supporters of comprehensive education. Yet there is evidence that this policy is now growing in popularity, and this is especially the case now that the right to acquire specialist status will no longer be restricted to an elite group of schools. There are, however, a number of problems associated with the scheme which need to be kept under review. Although only 6 per cent of such schools choose to do so, it is currently possible for schools specialising in technology, languages, sports, arts and music to select up to 10 per cent of their pupils on the basis of aptitude. This raises the whole question of how one can distinguish 'aptitude' from 'ability', except possibly in such areas as sport and music. There is also the point that in our class-divided and highly competitive society, specialisms can never be equal: they rapidly become ranked in a hierarchy of status. There is a real danger that the proliferation of specialist schools will exacerbate the already steep pecking order of secondary schools, particularly in urban areas.

More worrying than all of this is the policy of encouraging the spread of city academies. The idea of city academies is clearly modelled on the Conservative's City Technology Colleges Project announced by the then Education Secretary Kenneth Baker at the 1986 Conservative Party Conference. It was the original aim of Mrs Thatcher's Government to see a large network of CTCs established in inner-city areas throughout the country, but the programme stalled with the creation of just fifteen. New Labour has learned from the Conservatives' mistakes. Most significantly of all: whereas Kenneth Baker announced that business would pay 'all or most' of the estimated £10m cost of a new CTC, the present Government wants only about £2m from its sponsors. Of course, one of the chief problems with any such scheme of privatisation is that wholly undesirable or unsuitable individuals will gain control of our schools. One thinks here particularly of Sir Peter Vardy, an evangelical Christian who believes in 'creationism' and who already sponsors Emmanuel City College in Gateshead and a second college in Middlesbrough.

The ironic thing is that all of this is happening against the background of a remarkable story of *comprehensive success*. As measured by those entering and passing public examinations, standards have been steadily rising since the

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comprehensive school first became national policy in the 1960s. In 1962, when some 20 per cent of eleven-year-olds were selected for a grammar-school education, only 16 per cent of pupils obtained five O Level passes. In 2004, 52 per cent of sixteen-year-olds achieved at least five A\* to C passes at GCSE. The A Level examination, originally designed for less than ten per cent of the population, was achieved in two or more subjects by 37 per cent of young people in 2001. Numbers in higher education have risen from around eight per cent of the relevant age group in the early 1960s to 43 per cent today, with a government aim of increasing this to 50 per cent by the year 2010.

The Report of the cross-party Education Select Committee on secondary school admissions, published on 22 July 2004, argued that 'the Government needs to explain how it reconciles its insistence that there will be no return to selection with its willingness to retain and increase selection where it already exists'. It raised concerns that parents in many parts of the country were struggling with an unclear and poorly regulated admissions system. In the words of the Report: 'the school admissions process, founded on parental preference, can prove a frustrating and time-consuming cause of much distress in the lives of many families'.

The city academy programme was dealt a double blow on 17 March 2005 when league tables based on 2004 test results for 14-year-olds in English, maths and science revealed that nine of the academies came in the bottom 200 schools in England and when a report of the House of Commons Education and Skills Committee attacked the DfES for putting substantial resources into new academies without producing any reliable evidence on which to base the expansion of the project.

It would be really good if Labour ministers could (re)discover a belief in human educability, which was, after all, the original basis for the comprehensive reform. When this Government interferes in the *internal* organisation of schools, it does so in order to encourage setting by ability, even in the primary school, and the pinning of ability labels on children from an early stage. In other words, differentiation *within* schools as well as selection *between* schools, which is what Sir Keith Joseph was arguing for in an interview with Brian Walden on ITV's *Weekend World* in February 1984. Ministers really ought to find time to read the recently-published *Learning Without Limits*, compiled by a team of researchers at the University of Cambridge School of Education and based on the experiences of a group of classroom teachers who have rejected the concept of 'fixed ability'. This book has already received ecstatic reviews, notably by Tim Brighouse in *The Times Educational Supplement* (4 June 2004). It is only when we dismantle all the structures rooted in the fallacy of fixed ability or potential that we will have a truly effective state education system.



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What, then, are the short-term and long-term issues that the Left needs to concentrate on?

### (1) *Short-term issues*

- We need to continue the campaign against selection at 11, pointing out, for example, that exam results in Kent are worse than those in many inner-city boroughs in London.
- It might not be possible to reverse the Government's policy on specialist schools expansion, but we need to monitor their effect on existing hierarchies of schools in urban areas. We also need to resist the idea that specialist schools should have the right to select 10 per cent of their pupils on the basis of a dubious definition of 'aptitude'.
- We need to be particularly energetic in opposing the idea that corporate sponsors can buy and run schools. Even if suitable sponsors could be found, schools are not football clubs to be bought and sold by wealthy entrepreneurs. At the very least, we need to endorse the recommendation of the Commons Select Committee that the projected £5bn earmarked for the establishment of 200 city academies should be withheld until there has been a proper evaluation of the work of the existing 17 academies

### (2) *Long-term considerations*

- It can be argued that the Government has missed a golden opportunity to reform the whole structure of post-16 qualifications; and this is something the Left needs to campaign on. It was the Government itself which launched a major review of qualifications for older students in January 2003, to be carried out by Mike Tomlinson, a former Chief Inspector of Schools. When the Final Report of the Working Group was published in October 2004, it recommended the introduction of a broad 'baccalaureate-style' diploma designed to replace or subsume GCSEs and A Levels, improve parity of esteem between academic and vocational courses and broaden access to higher education. Unfortunately, the White Paper on the 14 to 19 curriculum, *14-19 Education and Skills*, published by new Education Secretary Ruth Kelly in February 2005, rejected the Tomlinson Report's key proposal for a four-tier overarching diploma embracing all academic and vocational qualifications and opted instead to retain GCSEs and A Levels largely in their present form. Its main feature was to accept the need for a rationalisation of vocational qualifications, with the proposed replacement of the existing 'alphabet soup' of 3,500 separate

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qualifications by a three-tier system of 'specialised diplomas' in 14 occupational areas or 'specialised learning lines'. Of course, this did nothing to solve the problem of the divided post-14 curriculum.

- We can at least welcome DfES support for the idea of the community school, albeit in a fairly primitive form. Under the heading 'Wrap-around childcare in schools', the *Five-Year Strategy* announces the development of a model for an 8 am to 6 pm 48-week-a-year childcare offer in primary schools. 1,000 primary schools will be offering this model by 2008; and it is planned to extend the idea to embrace a number of secondary schools. Provided this does not lead to the exploitation of teachers and other workers, it is an initiative to be welcomed.

### **Further Education and Training**

#### **Lifelong Education**

In recent years we have seen many moves towards the marketisation of education. The introduction of top-up fees, tiered funding in further education, contracted out prison education and sporadic provision of adult education have served merely to increase fears that privatisation is very much part of the New Labour agenda.

Marketisation is creating the worst kind of educational divide – choice is readily available for those who can afford it, but is unattainable by those who need it most. This Government has preached increased access to education since 1997, but practice has contradicted this. In a Labour third term, we want to see a reversal of this situation.

Education transforms and empowers people's lives. Access to it should be based on ability to study and not ability to pay. Currently less than 30% of the UK workforce have intermediate/technical skills, and this compares with 50% in France and 65% in Germany. Every time the economy goes into boom there are crucial skills shortages. Put simply, this skills gap will continue to widen without a full commitment from the Government and from employers to closing it.

#### ***Government commitment***

The Government must now concentrate on *employment* needs not just *employer* needs. Without a government commitment to a wide, fully resourced and funded training agenda that obliges employers to educate for life and train for the economy's needs, employers will continue to train their workforce to stand still.

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The current piecemeal workforce training cannot continue. Employers are bridging their skills gap by 'poaching' rather than 'coaching'. Currently there is no incentive for businesses to give their workforce more than the minimum skills for their narrow immediate needs and to start giving them the skills they need for the future. The past century has shown that volunteerism in employer training does not work. There has to be more of a positive incentive to get firms to train and increased power given to union negotiators.

The recent economy drive towards privatisation and the ever-increasing number of agency workers have meant that much of the workforce training agenda of the past has been lost. The Government is now on the back foot and it will not be easy to regain the level of skills provision pre-privatisation, although we can start by re-establishing comprehensive training in all nationalised public utilities.

Had the Government's agenda really been to train a workforce fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century we might have seen a greater focus on training in the Information and Consultation Regulations. What would be simpler than committing employers to an education and training committee in the work place where, sitting alongside union learning representatives would be the employer, who would be required to outline a full workforce-training plan?

At the same time, without a government commitment to Paid Educational Leave or Time Off to Learn, it will be impossible for many workers to find time to study, juggle caring responsibilities, travel arrangements with shift patterns and so on. Employee Training Pilots show how enabling people to study in work time transforms the situation. Extending this to statutory paid educational leave and full maintenance will be the only means of ensuring that training is seen as a *bonus* and not as a *determent*.

### **Employer commitment**

All too often, it is the business lobby that has stood in the way of our progress. The future of workplace learning is dependent on a commitment by the employers to adequately train their workforce. Employers realise the skills gap is a problem, but they believe it to be society's problem rather than theirs. For years employers have reaped the rewards of the state-funded education system but employers cannot just be the consumer of skills and they have to foot some of the bill.

Currently consultation with unions on training and employee development is legally required only when recognition is conceded after a ballot. For education and training to be taken seriously, it has to stand alongside pay and conditions in the collective bargaining list so unions have the statutory right to negotiate on

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these issues. It is surely a scandal that unions cannot currently negotiate on these terms.

Business should look to the trade union movement for ideas. The phenomenal growth in union branch learning representatives has shown how “barefoot” union education advice and guidance workers can reach part of the workforce that employers and government can only dream about. With the creation of a Union Learning Academy, the diverse strands of the TUC’s and union’s education and learning work and the new streams of union learning prompted by the Union Learning Fund, will be brought together into a new coherent and coordinated service. However, for this to have a real impact it needs to be backed by legislation and regulations to ensure employers have to consult on their learning and training plans. A number of policy initiatives are necessary for future development:

- learning committees in the workplace to match health and safety committees
- union learning representatives who have a statutory right to discuss training plans with their members
- employees who have the right to consult their union learning representatives on requests for training and receive a considered response from employers

### **Education for all**

It is important to take account of some simple facts about further education in this country:

- there are four million further education students throughout the UK
- 44% of all level three qualifications are awarded at local colleges
- more than half of all vocational qualifications are awarded via colleges
- 43% of students in higher education come from FE
- 13% of higher education is taught in FE
- colleges are grossly under funded with College staff earning 7% less than those working in schools

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### **Making curriculum and qualifications inclusive**

The elitist, class-based nature of English education and training is systemic within the curriculum and qualifications structure which prepares students for further study or employment. The disparity of esteem and status between 'academic' learning and 'vocational' learning has bedevilled the English system for over a century and goes to the heart of the country's appalling record in skills generation, productivity and international competitiveness. The last seven years have seen progressive moves towards reform of the 14-19 curriculum, but, as we have seen earlier in this Document, the Government has now rejected key elements of the Tomlinson Report. The introduction of two-year Foundation Degrees and other vocational initiatives in higher education could be the means to open opportunities for the real recognition of skills and new employment prospects – especially in the public service and para-professions. But foundation degrees must be funded on comparable rates to other areas in higher education and provide the firm foundation for progression to full degrees and professional qualifications.

Recently there has been a recognition of this country's disastrous legacy of adult illiteracy, innumeracy and low skills, and attempts have been made to address this. We have taken steps forward in Skills for Life basic skills policies as well as with the introduction of an entitlement to level 2 qualifications for all adults. We are close to a curriculum and qualifications framework for adult education and training that adult learners deserve. These policies will not however be taken seriously without the recognition of the almost insurmountable barriers created by lack of financial support. The introduction of a non means-tested adult learning grant, above its current pitiful level, must be a first priority.

### **Funding the gap**

Further Education Colleges are no longer the Cinderella of the tertiary sector, and have been recognised for what they do and what they can achieve. They are facing increased targets from an ever-demanding government, society and economy. Colleges have shown they are willing to rise to this new challenge, but will underachieve unless they get increased pay for their staff and resources for their students.

Training in the workplace and teaching the next generation will be impossible unless the Government is committed to closing the funding gap between schools and FE colleges and establishing pay and professional parity with other sectors of education. We can no longer rely on the further education sector to do more

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work and get the same results as schools and higher education on a fraction of their funding.

Exacerbating the funding gap is the introduction of different funding, based on performance. These tiered funding arrangements – whereby the colleges with the most problems – usually in urban areas – receive less money than the rest, are absurd. We want good local provision not an artificial ‘choice’ between first and second-class establishments. The introduction of differential funding heralds a new era throughout education. Performance related pay, tiered funding, top-up fees and so on will spell disaster for the achievement of a universal education system.

Further investment in further education should come from the public purse and it is surely wrong that new investment should arise from institutional links with businesses, thereby increasing the divide between wealthy institutions and those with basic funding.

### **Higher Education**

New Labour inherited a higher education situation in 1997 that was both full of exciting possibilities, but also fraught with very real difficulties. Over a period of 50 years, the overall participation rate in all forms of HE had increased eleven-fold: from around 3 per cent in 1950 to around 33 per cent when David Blunkett became Tony Blair’s first Education Secretary – with New Labour committed to a new participation rate of 50 per cent by the year 2010. Expansion has been particularly rapid since the passing of the 1988 Education Act; but it could be argued, that this had been engineered ‘on the cheap’, with a tight squeeze on the ‘unit of resource’ for each student and university staff pay allowed to fall considerably below the rate of inflation. Indeed, on this last point, it had been estimated by the CVCP (Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals) in 1996 that teachers working in British universities would require a 37 per cent pay rise simply to bring them back to the pay levels they had enjoyed in 1981.

### **The 2003 White Paper and 2004 Legislation**

After 18 months of media speculation, four postponed press launches and a number of well-sourced ‘leaked’ stories about serious differences of opinion within Tony Blair’s Cabinet, the then Education Secretary Charles Clarke finally announced the Government’s plans for the future of higher education in a 105-page White Paper, *The Future of Higher Education*, published on 22 January 2003.

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Many of the more immediately controversial measures to be found in this document were, of course, concerned with funding. From 2006, universities in England would be able to charge 'top up' tuition fees of up to £3,000 a year for their most popular and prestigious courses. Tuition fees would no longer be paid 'up-front'; and students would not have to pay their fees until they had graduated and were earning at least £15,000 a year (a repayment threshold that was higher than the previous one of £10,000). Payments after graduation would be made through the tax system, linked to the ability to pay.

Legislation allowing universities to charge students annual top-up fees reached the statute book on 1 July 2004, but this measure is widely opposed within the Labour Party and can never form part of a left-wing education programme. It should not be forgotten that during the Bill's rocky ride through Parliament the Government's majority was slashed to five at its second reading in the Commons in January 2004. This can hardly be regarded as a mandate for pressing ahead with this proposal.

### **'Great' Universities – What's in a Name?**

Quite apart from the funding issue, the Higher Education Act undermines many of the principles for which a Labour government ought to be fighting. There are real concerns that in terms of language as well as funding, the Government is devaluing the contribution and achievements of the overwhelming majority of students and the universities at which they study. Clearly, the history of the development and funding of HE in Britain and access by class have combined to ensure that universities do not all share the same functions. For example, there are universities which are likely to be and remain leading universities in terms of research – although the current funding regime for the latter as referred to above, needs to be fundamentally changed so that this stratification does not continue to be endorsed as a matter of public policy.

However, the debate on admissions (which is actually about the skewed admissions in terms of upper socio-economic class of a few institutions) has been at the expense of the contribution and reputation of the mainstream universities in widening participation. It has been accompanied by statements, including from Ministers, that the former group of universities are Britain's 'great' universities, that they are 'world-class' institutions and that they are *per se*, the part of the sector which should be valued.

This has done and continues to do a complete disservice to the mainstream universities. It has served to obscure the achievements of their staff and of course, their students. It has also served to confirm prejudices including of employers, business and in the media, notwithstanding the fact that employment

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rates of graduates from the mainstream universities are on a par with those from Russell Group institutions. In fact, if there was equity of funding in the sector and different factors in terms of value, then arguably the admissions 'problem' would disappear.

Thus, for example, if different criteria and values were used in describing the university sector, e.g. in terms of admission by ethnicity, Britain's 'great' universities would be Thames Valley, London South Bank, Middlesex, Westminster, Greenwich and Luton. Similarly if the factor of admission by lower socio-economic class were applied, in addition to the above institutions, Britain's 'great' universities would include Bolton, Central Lancashire, Central England, Coventry, Derby, University of East London, Anglia Polytechnic, Roehampton, Sunderland, Staffordshire, Teesside and Wolverhampton.

These universities have added enormously to social cohesion. They and their students are significant contributors to the private and public sectors and therefore to the competitiveness of Britain plc. It is difficult to understand why Ministers continue to endorse by public statement and policy, a strategy which confirms stratification rather than celebrates success – especially since this is also success in terms of the present Government's stated objectives for higher education.

We need a higher education structure which celebrates the work of *all* our institutions and where research and teaching are seen to be inextricably linked. In the 2003 White Paper, the Government urged 'less research-intensive institutions' to all but forget about trying to make major breakthroughs in, say, science and technology and instead to work more closely with local companies solving 'real-world problems'. What this amounts to is the wholesale restoration of the old two-tier university/polytechnic divide and it must be challenged with renewed vigour.