

British Labour Party education policy and comprehensive education: From Learning to Live to Circular 10/65

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ABSTRACT

Fifty years after the production of Circular 10/65, which confirmed comprehensive education as the national policy for secondary education in England and Wales, it is possible to trace the idea of comprehensive education from the 1940s to the 1960s, to understand the position of the Labour Party in its development, and to assess the nature of the contribution of Circular 10/65 itself to comprehensive education in Britain. There were strong connections between the 1944 Education Act and Circular 10/65. In particular, Michael Stewart, the Labour Party education policy review of 1957-1958, and the 1958 report Learning to Live that arose from this, played a key mediating role. Awareness of public opinion through the then novel device of market research and a determination to consolidate ambitious reforming ideals into a practical strategy for educational reform over the longer term formed part of the party's revisionist approach under Hugh Gaitskell, and helped to provide the basis for Labour's policy on comprehensive education when it returned to power in 1964.

KEY WORDS

comprehensive, secondary, politics, policy, Labour Party

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1. Introduction

Circular 10/65, 'The organisation of secondary education', was produced by the Department of Education and Science (DES) in Britain on 12 July 1965, and was sent to all local education authorities (LEAs) and the governors of direct grant, voluntary aided and special agreement schools.¹ It is a slight document, only eleven pages in length, but its appearance is deceptive. Many commentators then and since have recognised its seminal importance to the history of education in Britain since the Second World War, and to the spread of comprehensive schools. Fifty years after its initial circulation, the current article seeks to trace the idea of comprehensive education from the 1940s to the 1960s, to understand the position of Labour Party education policy in its development, and to assess the nature of the contribution of Circular 10/65 itself to comprehensive education in Britain.

Through this Circular, the secretary of state for education and science requested LEAs, if they had not already done so, to prepare and submit to him plans for reorganising secondary education in their areas on comprehensive lines. Like other Circulars in the British system of local government, it was designed to offer non-statutory guidance rather than legal sanction.² Its expressed purpose was to 'provide some central guidance on the methods by which this can be achieved'.³ It noted that there were several ways in which comprehensive education could be organised, and identified six main forms of comprehensive organisation that had been developed so far. There was first what it described as the orthodox comprehensive school with an age range of 11-18. Secondly, there was a two-tier system in which all pupils transferred first at 11 to a junior comprehensive school and then at 13 or 14 to a senior

comprehensive school. Third, it noted a system in which all pupils would transfer to a junior comprehensive school at 11, but then only some would transfer to a senior school while the remainder stayed on in the same school. Fourth, it recognised another kind of two-tier approach in which all pupils on leaving primary school transferred to a junior comprehensive school, but then at the age of 13 or 14 all pupils had a choice between a senior school that catered for those who expected to stay at school well beyond the compulsory age, and a senior school catering for those who did not. A fifth system was that of comprehensive schools with an age range of 11 to 16 combined with sixth form colleges for pupils over 16. Finally, there was a system of middle schools which would be comprehensives for pupils from 8 to 12, or 9 to 13, then proceeding to a comprehensive with an age range of 12 or 13 to 18. It acknowledged that the most appropriate system would depend on local circumstances, and that an LEA might decide to adopt more than one form of organisation. It regarded the first, second, fifth and sixth of these identified types of organisation as fully comprehensive, but the third and fourth as not fully comprehensive because they involved the separation of children of different aims and aptitudes into different schools at the age of 13 or 14, and were thus only an interim stage in a development towards a fully comprehensive secondary organisation.⁴

Several useful studies of Circular 10/65 have been produced, including contributions by Dennis Dean and David Crook.⁵ These have established the general background to the Circular, with Dean in particular emphasising the part played by Anthony Crosland, the responsible secretary of state at the time that it was introduced. A key paper remains that of Brian Simon, who in 1992 published a retrospective analysis of the politics of comprehensive reorganisation.⁶ Simon argued that, unlike their opponents, the supporters of comprehensive reorganisation lacked what he described

as 'clarity of purpose, unwavering determination and above all political will'.⁷ For Simon, Circular 10/65 vividly exemplified this problem because it merely requested LEAs to submit plans for comprehensive education, rather than requiring them to do so. He concluded that 'One outcome of this decision may be that we still do not have universal comprehensive education in England a generation (27 years) later.'⁸ Thus, according to Simon, the fundamental historical question to explain was the Labour Party's lack of political will or strength of purpose that expressed itself in particular in relation to comprehensive education.

On one level, the current paper seeks clues to address the issue that Simon raised in his paper of 1992. It is able to pursue this partly because of the fuller perspective that the past two decades have provided on the historical experience of comprehensive education in the English context. This period has witnessed the further growth of challenges to comprehensive schools and an emphasis on choice, diversity and selection that have culminated in the academies and free school movements.⁹ As Crook notes, 'Though no death certificate or body to bury has emerged, the orderliness of historical periodization may now demand that "the comprehensive era" should take its place alongside "the Revised Code era", "the school board era" and "the era of child-centredness".'¹⁰ This in turn suggests that the high tide of comprehensive education as a national policy, in the 1960s, may have been transitory and exceptional rather than part of a steady evolution to a new order in the English context, and that the system was now beginning to revert to its former emphasis on localism and difference, albeit in a radically changed context of experiments in public-private partnerships, school specialisation, and neoliberal market-based initiatives.¹¹

The passage of time also permits fresh perspectives on the phase of educational policy that preceded the advance of comprehensive education, the period of reform

ushered in by the Education Act of 1944. There have been several substantial treatments of the Act itself and of aspects of the debates that preceded it.¹² The new policy regime underpinned by the Education Reform Act of 1988 offered a different contemporary context by which to evaluate the significance of the 1944 Act.¹³ The delayed and longer-term effects of the 1944 Act are now also coming under increasing scrutiny. For example, a recent detailed study has documented the delayed implementation of the raising of the school leaving age to 16, which was introduced in 1972 after being proposed in the legislation of 1944. This research has also been able to show how this reform helped to create the conditions for the rise of mass higher education later in the century, which then was followed by a further increase in the educational participation age to 18 under the Education and Skills Act of 2008.¹⁴ The current article seeks to review the development of the contested notion of comprehensive education from the debates that led initially to the 1944 Act through to Circular 10/65 over two decades later, in order to trace the connections between them.

With the further passage of time, it is also becoming possible to reflect on issues that were once matters of intense partisanship. The postwar period was formative and of lasting historical significance for the development of social institutions such as education, with implications that endured well into the twenty-first century. It continues to evoke sharp memories on the part of those who lived through these decades and took part in these events. However, we can now start to treat this period with a measure of historical perspective and critical detachment, while imagining the context in which different individuals and groups sought to engage with and influence this debate. In doing so, we need to understand not only the enthusiasm of activists and the dedication to particular causes shown by the career politician or the local advocate, but also the attitudes and opinions of communities in a broader sense. In this particular

case, it is the relationship between politicians and policy makers on one hand and 'public opinion' on the other, that starts to come into sharper relief.

Another way in which we are now able to revisit the arguments in Simon's 1992 paper is through methodological advancement. Simon was mainly confined to published accounts of comprehensive education, although he was himself closely involved in the debates around it.¹⁵ He was aware that Michael Stewart, briefly the secretary of state for education and science before Anthony Crosland was appointed to the position in January 1965, might be able to help explain these events, and planned to meet him to discuss them, but, as he recalled, 'unfortunately, just as I began to make arrangements, he became seriously ill and shortly after died'.¹⁶ He had lost a potentially valuable source of evidence; 'That source has gone for ever', he lamented.¹⁷ This proved not to be entirely the case, however, as Stewart left a substantial archive which was deposited at Churchill College Cambridge. Moreover, Simon's own archive was left to the Institute of Education London after his death in 2002. Such personal archives, supplementing the records at the National Archive in Kew, London, make it possible to reconstruct the arguments around comprehensive education that went on behind the scenes as opposed to in the public spotlight.¹⁸ Public opinion polls have also become a source of interest to historians, both in the sense of being historical sources of information about public opinion and for their role in political decision making, and the archive of Mark Abrams, also at Churchill College Cambridge, provides further relevant insights on these issues.¹⁹

These records highlight in particular Stewart's mediating role in the development of the idea of comprehensive education, and connections with the debates within the Labour Party over education policy when he was shadow secretary of state for education in the late 1950s. It was during this period that the Labour Party had

produced a significant policy statement on education entitled Learning to Live.²⁰ Very little has been written about this policy episode, and its potential significance has been rarely understood. Keith Fenwick's early study of the spread of comprehensive schools was aware of a Labour Party study group to prepare this policy statement, but commented that within the group 'the comprehensive school policy seems to have produced no dissension'.²¹ Denis Lawton's more recent history of Labour Party education policy appears unaware of this group or of any arguments around it, and goes so far as to claim that the years between 1951 and 1964 were 'squandered in as much as too little re-thinking about education had taken place'.²² Nirmala Rao's discussion of arguments around selection and the neighbourhood school refers to Learning to Live but scarcely mentions Simon's work.²³ There was in fact significant re-thinking of education within the Labour Party at this time, including vigorous arguments within and around its study group leading to the publication of Learning to Live, which was one of many groups and sub-committees established by Labour's national executive committee to review particular areas of policy. It was indeed this debate, and Stewart's involvement in it, that provided much of the basis for Circular 10/65. Moreover, this Labour Party policy discussion of 1957-1958 itself owed much to the ideas, values and policies established by the Education Act of 1944. It therefore provides a potential link between the 1944 Act and Circular 10/65.

Focusing on the Labour Party education policy group of 1957-58 and Learning to Live also reminds us of the political and social context of that period. The Labour Party had lost the general election held in 1955, and Hugh Gaitskell was elected as the new party leader.²⁴ By 1957, as the Conservative government put in place a new prime minister, Harold Macmillan, and as economic prosperity began to improve, the electoral prospects of the Labour Party appeared to be poor. Gaitskell was convinced

that the party required radical changes to its policies and social outlook if it were ever to regain power, and began to promote a new approach that was soon styled as 'revisionist'.²⁵ This was intended to break with previous policies and to make the party electable through cultivating ideas that engaged with contemporary social changes. With this aim in view, a series of study groups was set up to develop statements in different areas of social policy. At the same time, a more scientific approach was beginning to be taken of gauging the public mood through the systematic use of public opinion polls, already familiar if not infallible in the USA.²⁶ Opinion polling was being slowly integrated into British politics during the 1950s, despite some resistance, and Gaitskell was particularly interested in using this new device to test the popularity of his party's policies.²⁷ It was the combination of these two new factors, revisionism and public opinion polls, that was to help to calibrate Labour's policies on comprehensive education and led eventually to Circular 10/65.

2. The legacy of the 1944 Education Act

The debate leading to the Education Act of 1944 began to reveal emerging attitudes towards comprehensive schools. In general, the politicians and policy makers responsible for developing the Act were reluctant to move in this direction. The reasons given for this reluctance included a belief that children's capacities and interests were too diverse to justify housing them within a single type of school, a view that they had been tried and failed elsewhere, a preference for freedom and variety in education, and an assumption that 'public opinion' was not yet ready for such a development. The 1944 Act itself did not commit itself to putting in place any specific kind of institution or organisation of secondary education, but the arrangements that it did make were nevertheless crucial for further developments in this area and thus had a lasting legacy.

Even before the start of the Second World War, an inquiry by the Board of Education's consultative committee on secondary education generated discussion about future possibilities. One key Board official, Robert Wood, pointed out in 1937 that provision of academic grammar school education had more than doubled since 1914, and suggested that this growth might have been 'overdone', since 'something different is wanted for many children'.²⁸ Wood insisted, moreover, that 'This is not merely a bureaucratic view. Headmasters are known to admit that they have a number of misfits, and Local Education Authorities are themselves beginning to suggest that some alternative form of "Secondary School" is needed for many pupils.'²⁹ For this reason, he argued, each child should be given the education that was best adapted to their capacities: 'To attempt to put children through the same mental mill would be as stupid and dangerous a proceeding as to put all children through the same physical training without any consideration of their differing degrees of height or strength of physique.'³⁰ These ideas about individual differences lay at the heart of the Spens report on secondary education, which concluded that different types of secondary school should be established to cater for such differences.³¹

From 1941 onwards, as reform proposals began to be developed in detail, there was some support for comprehensive schools, or what were often called 'multilateral' schools that combined different types of education, or 'common' schools designed to cater for all pupils over eleven years of age. The president of the board of education, R.A. Butler, was aware of this approach, and was prepared to accept that 'logically' there was 'a great deal to be said' in its favour.³² His objections to it were based first on his preference for freedom and variety in education, and secondly in his sense of the state of public opinion. He pointed out that 'in framing educational policy I am continually inspired by relics of the belief that we are a free country'. Moreover, he

added, 'If we were to force every child into one type of school it would be one thing, but there is the risk that the law would be got round and people would start up a series of private schools, less satisfactory than those existing at present'. He was also concerned that it would not be practicable for legislation supporting common schools to be carried through Parliament.³³ This was a pragmatic acceptance that the Conservative majority in the House of Commons, and the prime minister Winston Churchill, would be most unlikely to countenance such a policy.³⁴ His permanent secretary, Sir Maurice Holmes, was equally cautious, although he was also conscious of a widespread demand for social equality that had been stimulated by the War: 'I should say that the Common School is bound to come sooner or later, but whether public opinion will be ripe for it at the end of the war it is impossible to say.'³⁵ At this time there were few reliable means of discerning in any precise fashion what the state of public opinion actually was, especially since the last general election had been held in very different circumstances in 1935, but it was a significant element in the development of educational reform.

The common school approach was strongly resisted by the veteran educator Sir Cyril Norwood, appointed to chair a committee with the remit to review the curriculum and examinations in secondary schools. The first meeting of his committee worked from the assumption that there would be a diversity of secondary schools including grammar schools, technical schools and modern schools, and that 'the tradition of secondary education, the best in the world, must be preserved'.³⁶ At the same time, Norwood suggested that there should be a common curriculum in all kinds of secondary school from the age of eleven to thirteen.³⁷ Several months later, Norwood met the president of the board of education, R.A. Butler, to review progress. As Butler noted, Norwood asked Butler 'whether the Common School question was coming to

the front and said there was growing support for it'.³⁸ Norwood himself argued on this occasion that 'it would take twenty years to introduce such a reform satisfactorily', and to support this pointed out that France had found it difficult to introduce this reform in 1934.³⁹ Butler 'entirely agreed', commenting that 'reforms such as the Common School and raising the age to sixteen must follow upon an improvement in the schools into which we desired to introduce such changes'.⁴⁰

It was notable also that Sir Percival Sharp, the secretary of the Association of Education Committees which represented LEAs, and a member of the Norwood committee, fully supported these views, as least as reported by Norwood. According to Norwood, indeed, following a two-hour discussion with him, Sharp 'spits on multilateralism, having been to America'.⁴¹ Norwood enlarged somewhat on this assertion in a further note to Butler: 'He is all against multi-lateralism. He has seen it in New York and elsewhere. He does not believe in the multilateral headmaster'.⁴² This was intriguing evidence that the American experience of the high school for all was not fully convincing on the other side of the Atlantic.

These attitudes and concerns were reflected in the Education White Paper, Educational Reconstruction, published in July 1943, and in the Norwood Report, Curriculum and Examinations in Secondary Schools, published ten days later. Both documents set out new arrangements for secondary education framed around three different types of secondary school – grammar, technical and modern. The White Paper noted that 'It would be wrong to suppose that they will necessarily remain separate and apart. Different types may be combined in one building or on one site as considerations of convenience and efficiency may suggest. In any case the free interchange of pupils from one type of education to another must be facilitated'.⁴³ On

the other hand, the Norwood report explicitly associated each of these institutions with different 'types of mind'.⁴⁴

The Education Act of 1944 did not itself endorse these sentiments, but it did set in place a number of key provisions that were to be no less significant in subsequent years. First, there would be a new Ministry of Education, under a Minister whose duty would be 'to provide the education of the people of England and Wales and the progressive development of institutions devoted to that purpose, and to secure the effective execution by local authorities, under his control and direction, of the national policy for providing a varied and comprehensive education service in every area'.⁴⁵ This asserted the need for a national policy in education, for which the Minister of Education would be responsible, but it also highlighted the central role of LEAs in its execution. It would be the duty of the LEA to ensure that efficient primary, secondary and further education was available to serve the needs of the population of the area.⁴⁶ They were to do so by preparing a development plan for their area and submitting it to the Ministry.⁴⁷ Third, while religious instruction and an act of collective worship would be compulsory in all schools, secular instruction would be under the control of the LEA rather than that of the Minister.⁴⁸ There was in these provisions a particular mixture of central control and local responsibility. The Ministry controlled the overall framework, but LEAs could interpret the specific needs of their own area. This was notably the case with the development plans. In relation to secondary education, while the Ministry of Education followed the tripartite approach of the Norwood Report, many LEAs made their own choices to define the nature of provision in their own area in their own way.⁴⁹

In general, then, the discussions that led to the Education Act of 1944, and the regime that the Act underpinned, together created the context for arguments around

comprehensive education. Officials, politicians and reformers harboured doubts about comprehensive education based on their understandings of individual differences, the importance of freedom and diversity, the tradition of secondary education, the lessons of overseas experience, and the state of public opinion. The Act itself promoted the idea of national policy but created an elaborate system of localised discretion. These ingredients provided a powerful legacy for the subsequent debate both in general terms and within the Labour Party.

3. The Labour debate over the comprehensive schools

After the War, a Labour government was in office from 1945 until 1951, with two ministers of education in succession in Ellen Wilkinson and George Tomlinson. Neither showed any interest in comprehensive education, preferring to try to support the new secondary modern schools as a proper alternative to the established grammar schools for non-academic pupils.⁵⁰ Discussions over the merits of comprehensive education continued during this period.⁵¹ The debate that ensued after Labour returned to Opposition in October 1951, culminating in the policy statement Learning to Live, established the broad approach for the Labour government that came to power in 1964.

The debate over the comprehensive school resumed in the broader context of internal Labour Party conflicts between the followers of Aneurin Bevan, the Welsh left-wing leader, and the rising right-wing Labour politician Hugh Gaitskell. The Bevanites were committed to pursuing further socialist change to build on the achievements of the Labour government, while Gaitskell counselled caution and moderation. Education policy began to be caught up in this wider struggle. In 1953, a strong policy statement produced by Labour's National Executive Committee, Challenge to Britain, committed

itself to ending the eleven-plus examination and the different types of schools in secondary education, in favour of all children between the ages of eleven and fifteen sharing the academic and social benefits of one secondary school.⁵² However, this left the principle of comprehensive education for children over fifteen unresolved, and Norman Morris on behalf of the National Association of Labour Teachers succeeded in having this part of the proposals referred back for further discussion at the 1953 Labour Party conference, held in Margate.⁵³ At the same time, the Party was committed to what the Times Educational Supplement, no friend to comprehensive education in this period, as an 'infinitely costly distraction'.⁵⁴

There were clear differences within the parliamentary Labour Party in terms of defining a viable way forward. For example, Fred Blackburn, recently elected as Member of Parliament (MP) for Stalybridge and Hyde and a member of the party's parliamentary sub-committee on education policy, argued that it was not possible to establish effective comprehensive schools with appropriate facilities and staffing all over the country. *He* concluded that 'Since the provision of a network of such schools covering the whole country would take probably half a century, we are bound to look to alternative solutions.'⁵⁵ Blackburn also invoked the idea of public opinion in resisting the wholesale application of comprehensive education: 'It would not be enough if every member of the Labour Party thoroughly understood the scheme and accepted it unreservedly; we shall still have to carry the electorate with us.' Moreover, he observed the potential dangers of 'compulsion' and the need to allow for 'variety' of organisation.⁵⁶ These were arguments that had already been familiar to the architects of the 1944 Act. Charles Pannell, MP for Leeds West since 1949, supported these views. On the other hand, Alice Bacon, another Leeds MP on the right wing of the party, was a strong advocate of comprehensive schools, while another right-winger,

Freda Corbett, dissociated herself from Blackburn's comments which she dismissed as being 'tantamount to a postponement of Labour's plans for an indefinite number of years'.⁵⁷ Indeed, Corbett argued as early as March 1954 that 'Local Education Authorities should be asked to formulate plans to be brought into being within a short number of years for the abolition of selection at 11+'.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, it was already clear that a rapid movement towards comprehensive education on a national scale would be a very heavy financial and logistical commitment. At the same time, if comprehensive schools were introduced in the same buildings and locations as existing schools, they might reflect current social differences between localities. Labour MPs were also keenly conscious of the arrangements under the 1944 Act in which the Ministry of Education had limited powers in a partnership with the LEAs.⁵⁹

A second general election defeat in 1955 and the subsequent election of Hugh Gaitskell as Labour Party leader changed the balance of this internal debate. Gaitskell was convinced that in order to win the next election, Labour would need to revise its policies to be more in tune with the views of ordinary voters. His 'revisionist' approach rejected public ownership as a first principle in favour of a mixed economy, and he preferred to support general principles of social equality, cooperation and political freedom, with freedom if anything placed ahead of equality.⁶⁰ In education, he chose as shadow minister Michael Stewart, MP for Fulham, whom he had known since they were both undergraduates at the University of Oxford in the 1920s.⁶¹ The Oxford connection was strengthened with the active participation of Margaret Cole, wife of the Oxford political scientist G.D.H. Cole, who had known both Gaitskell and Stewart as undergraduates.⁶² Margaret Cole's views struck a chord with the revisionist views of Gaitskell and Stewart. She supported the principle of the common or comprehensive school,⁶³ but was highly critical, as she told Gaitskell in a letter that was sent on to

Stewart, of what she described as ‘the very airy cloud-cuckoo-land talk of many in our Party – and the TUC [Trades Union Congress] spokesmen – about what we would do in 1960, without any real conception of (a) finance, (b) manpower’. She added: ‘I am afraid that Labour LEAs may be expected, under a Labour Government, to do things which no one has given them the means to do.’⁶⁴ It was essential, she concluded, to avoid ‘a lot of promises and pie that just can’t be fulfilled’.⁶⁵

This view also chimed with the broader sentiments expressed in Anthony Crosland’s book The Future of Socialism, published in 1956. This was a vigorous expression of socialist aspirations for the next generation, and resonated widely. It emphasised the importance of education, criticising the school system as remaining ‘the most divisive, unjust, and wasteful of all the aspects of social inequality’.⁶⁶ It opposed selection at the age of eleven, and favoured a system of comprehensive schools. At the same time, it recognised that the current system inherited an elaborate non-comprehensive structure, and therefore acknowledged that the Labour Party ‘could never impose a comprehensive system rapidly on the entire country’.⁶⁷ Also, as Crosland pointed out, there was a high degree of local autonomy; only a minority of LEAs currently favoured comprehensive schools, ‘and no one proposes that the remainder should be coerced’.⁶⁸ A Labour Government should therefore state a preference for the comprehensive principle and ‘should actively encourage local authorities – and such advice carries great weight – to be more audacious in experimenting with comprehensive schools’.⁶⁹

This pragmatic approach to the issues involved, with its awareness of practicalities, was also rooted in the educational regime ushered in by the 1944 Act. In particular, the autonomy of LEAs and teachers was widely viewed as being sacrosanct, to the extent that it was generally agreed that reforms should not be imposed upon them.

Stewart therefore deemed it necessary to recommend a 'continuous use of all the instruments of persuasion which are at the Ministry's disposal to encourage the advance of the comprehensive principle',⁷⁰ rather than compulsion. Stewart and Cole reminded colleagues in a joint memorandum that 'a Labour Government, desiring to influence the content of education, must be content to use the means of persuasion, of which of course the most powerful is financial persuasion'. There were many ways of bringing influence to bear, they argued, but 'direct compulsion, or any threat of it, would be disastrous'.⁷¹

A further obstacle was financial. In 1957, the total annual expenditure on education was approaching £500 million. Over the next decade, it was anticipated that there would be a population 'bulge' for schools to cater for, a need to reduce the size of classes especially in primary schools, an extension of education for fifteen to eighteen year olds whether or not the school leaving age was raised to sixteen as the 1944 Act had originally intended, a further move towards replacing slum school premises and improving equipment, and an expansion in technical education. The combination of these trends might easily take educational expenditure to £700 million or even more. A wholesale introduction of comprehensive schools in all areas would add greatly to this expense. Stewart and Cole argued that it would be essential for the success of a comprehensive school that it should be established in a 'new, handsome, well-equipped building', with adequate equipment and staff from a wide range of backgrounds. However, they warned, it would be 'impossible' to fulfil these requirements by building new schools for all children of secondary school age in the next five or ten years. In these circumstances, they added, it would be necessary to find alternative solutions. It might be possible, for example, to group neighbouring schools, or to place sixth form pupils in a junior college.⁷²

One innovative reformer who came forward with an alternative plan of this kind was Robin Pedley, a lecturer in education based at Leicester University. Pedley argued that all pupils should go on to attend a county college at the age of fifteen rather than some staying on in school to go into the sixth form. Such an arrangement, he proposed, 'would give true comprehensive education to all our young men and women, enabling workers in industry and classroom to understand each other as no school can enable them to do'.⁷³ His scheme attracted interest and support in many quarters, including for example in Leicestershire, and from local education officers such as Wearing King in Croydon.⁷⁴

Thus, the Labour Party in opposition began to identify a viable approach to the further development of 'secondary education for all'. This was all the more important as the Conservative government reelected in 1955 sought to consolidate the educational arrangements that it had inherited from the 1944 Act.⁷⁵ The minister of education, Sir David Eccles, was aware of Labour's growing interest in comprehensive education, and set out to respond to this with the recognition that education would need to be treated as 'the most urgent of all social problems' over the next decade.⁷⁶ He regarded education as an area of policy that could persuade 'erstwhile Labour voters' to defect politically to the 'Tory Middle Class', but acknowledged a danger that what he regarded as the Conservatives' 'splendid record' on education might be forgotten as the public demanded 'an ever growing rate of quantity and quality'.⁷⁷ The political stakes were therefore high as both of the main parties set out their respective agendas for the future of secondary education.

4. The Labour Party study group on education

These issues came to the fore in the study group on education that was established by the Labour Party in 1957. Stewart and Cole advised the group before its first meeting that the difficulties involved in requiring all LEAs to abandon selection and segregation at 11-plus and transforming all of their secondary schools into comprehensive schools had not been closely examined, suggesting moreover that 'it is for consideration how far, and by what methods, the principle of comprehensive secondary education can best be promoted in the light of practical difficulties and of the need to respect the rights of local authorities'.⁷⁸ The limiting factors, as they noted, were 'teachers, buildings and money'.⁷⁹ They also emphasised that in order to enjoy sufficient public support to bring about a nationwide shift towards comprehensive schools it would be crucial to provide more explanation of and propaganda for this policy, both within the Labour Party and among the general public.⁸⁰ In short, they concluded, the Labour Party was at present 'committed to a wholesale and rapid implementation of the comprehensive principle which takes little account of actual conditions and possibilities'.⁸¹ A further memorandum to the group the following month stressed and underlined the point that it would be 'physically impossible to create comprehensive schools throughout the country on the "orthodox" lines outlined above'.⁸²

Considerable discussion of these issues ensued at the third meeting of the study group on 16 July. It was eventually decided, first, that there should not be selection of children at the age of eleven into different types of secondary schools; second, that the aim of Labour's education policy would be to promote 'in every possible way' the reorganisation of secondary education to ensure that all children had access to the courses most suitable to their abilities and aptitudes; and third, that a future Labour government would not need to pass a major new Education Act, 'but that the present

1944 Act could be used to bring about the reorganisation required'.⁸³ *These were key decisions*, partly for ensuring that the 1944 Act would have a delayed legacy in this area, but also for the basic tenets of Labour's future policy. The study group also accepted that 'there was no need to impose on LEAs a uniform method of implementing the principle of non selection into separate types of schools, but that the new secondary schools, catering for children between the ages of 11 and 18, could be organised in a variety of ways, depending on local wishes and circumstances'.⁸⁴ A future Labour Minister of Education would not be expected to compel LEAs to reorganise their schools, but a financial inducement might be provided, and LEAs would be asked rather than directed to submit proposals for reorganisation.⁸⁵

A further set of issues arose in relation to finding out the state of public opinion on comprehensive education. Although 'public opinion' had often been invoked, it was only in the 1950s that this began to be identified on a scientific basis through the use of public opinion polls. The Labour Party was now commissioning Mark Abrams, the managing director of Research Services Ltd, to conduct such polls in particular areas of policy. Abrams himself was confident that 'society is adding to its resources a set of tools whereby public opinion can be reliably measured and appreciated'.⁸⁶ He was invited to provide an education survey and to discuss his report with the study group.⁸⁷ This he did at the end of the year, with findings that were highly disconcerting. Abrams argued that the sample used for the survey was 'reasonably representative', although he acknowledged that it was relatively small, comprising 400 men and women in all who were aged between 30 and 49 years old and the parents of children between 5 and 16.⁸⁸ He had found that education for their children was of little consequence to most working class parents, who were generally content to leave matters as they were. Moreover, the idea of the comprehensive school had made practically no impact on

them, and they did not appear to be interested in spending more money on education. He concluded that the name 'comprehensive schools' should be changed on the grounds that 'Hitherto it had made little impact on the public and to a small though probably influential minority it had distasteful connotations.'⁸⁹ Labour's whole educational programme, he added for good measure, should emphasise opportunity for able children rather than a purely egalitarian approach.⁹⁰ If this could be achieved, he suggested, 'the idea of the comprehensive school could be made popular, particularly with working class parents, but its name should in fact be changed'.⁹¹

Seeking to respond to these observations, a further memorandum summing up the political implications of Abrams' survey was circulated to the group. This noted that 'Obviously a great deal more propaganda is necessary to put the idea of the comprehensive school across to the public. Careful thought should perhaps be given as to how this is to be done.'⁹² It went on to suggest that the 'real appeal' of the comprehensive school lay in stressing the opportunities that these schools offered to all children who could benefit from a grammar school education, and 'manifold' opportunities in other directions for the rest. It conceded also that to be effective such 'propaganda' would need to be carried on over a long period of time, probably well beyond the next general election.⁹³ A policy argued around 'conventional educational improvements' might win popularity, it concluded, but 'One that argues on manifestly doctrinal or egalitarian grounds could prove unpopular, even among our own supporters.'⁹⁴ The 'revisionism' espoused by the Labour Party leadership emphasised the need to extend Labour support into the middle classes, but here was a risk that its educational policy might tend to alienate not only middle-class opinion but also its working-class heartlands.

Norman Morris, a lecturer in education at the University of Manchester, deputy chair of the Manchester education committee and head of the National Association of Labour Teachers, and a key member of the study group, took clear lessons from Abrams' survey, as he declared in a further memorandum to the group: 'The case for implementing the comprehensive principle must be presented with care. Doctrinaire assertions that secondary education must conform to this or that pattern for ideological reasons, only annoy some people and cannot in any case be carried out.'⁹⁵ Morris argued therefore that 'Our policy should be to say that we want every school to become an opportunity school in which every child has access to a wide choice of combinations of options within his own school.'⁹⁶

The following month, another memorandum posed the question directly about changing the name of comprehensive schools, and suggested 'secondary high school' as a possible alternative.⁹⁷ It noted also that comprehensive schools in the United States seemed to be the source of 'growing dissatisfaction', partly it appeared because they were not streamed, so that 'the brightest and the dullest are taught at the same pace'. It urged therefore that 'It might be worth while emphasising that this procedure is not in line with most British educational thought and that in the comprehensive schools that we envisage, there will be ample opportunity to all children capable of doing so of advancing in their studies to the full stretch of their abilities'.⁹⁸ In the event, the study group decided that the name 'comprehensive school' should be retained. However, it agreed, in partial recognition of Abrams' findings, that Labour's policy document should refer to 'comprehensive education' where possible rather than to 'comprehensive schools'.⁹⁹

Even this formulation in the minutes of the meeting appear to underplay the significance of the discussion. Morris was in no doubt about this. More than thirty

years later, he wrote to Brian Simon to explain Abrams' findings and the study group's ultimate reaction to them: 'Overwhelmingly, the public wanted no change and considered that comprehensive schools lowered standards. Broken down, Labour voters were as anti-comprehensive as the public at large. We decided to sit on the poll. So far as I know, no one broke silence about it. It would certainly have been used against us!'¹⁰⁰

The following month, a weekend conference was held at the Oulton Hall Hotel, Clacton-on-Sea, to discuss and promote Labour's educational plans with party activists, an event with strong propagandist overtones to educate the wider party about the new policy in preparation for the policy statement to follow.¹⁰¹ The propagandising aspect of educating the public about comprehensive schools was now being envisaged in a '15-20 year perspective'. Given 'time and flexibility', the views reported from the weekend conference appeared to be that 'a comprehensive system of education could be achieved, but,,that the terms of policy should be sufficiently camouflaged to avoid a head-on clash with narrow grammar school interests'.¹⁰²

Legislation might still be required if persuasion and financial incentives were insufficient to win over recalcitrant LEAs, but it appeared that 'comprehensive education, could, over a long period of time, become the major form of education in the country, without new legislation'.¹⁰³ The study group went so far as to rehearse the form that legislation might take. Alternatively, as it observed with some prescience, if they relied on persuasion 'they must accept the fact that a future Conservative Government might be less enthusiastic about this policy and realise that it may take many years before a comprehensive system of education has established itself'.¹⁰⁴

Even now, there was some reluctance to take this policy forward in a number of quarters. For example, Robert Beloe, the director of education in Surrey, wrote to

Gaitskell as late as May 1958 to maintain that the comprehensive school should not be regarded as a priority: 'First, it just isn't practicable and efficient in many places. Secondly, many people really think it is educationally an unsound unit.'¹⁰⁵ Beloe called for further study of how to provide the 'elasticity' that the tripartite system failed to give. Nevertheless, Gaitskell committed the party to the policy that the study group had devised, on the basis that it offered the best and most viable solution to a complex policy problem.

Based on the study group's recommendations, and a detailed policy statement that it had drafted on this and a wide range of other areas, Gaitskell launched the Labour Party's new education policy report, Learning to Live, in June 1958. Chapter four, which addressed comprehensive secondary education, emphasised the idea of opportunity for all, and insisted that comprehensive education would extend the grammar school tradition rather than undermining the quality of work produced in the grammar schools.¹⁰⁶ The report actually proposed that a Labour Government would 'require' LEAs 'with all reasonable speed, to adopt the comprehensive principle and provide in each secondary school a wide range of courses'.¹⁰⁷ It appears that such compulsion was only intended to take place if all else failed. Media responses were broadly favourable. The traditionalist newspaper the Daily Telegraph complained that it was a 'gamble with the schools', and that comprehensive schools were against the spirit of the education system.¹⁰⁸ Others were more positive, and the Schoolmaster and Woman Teacher's Chronicle understood and sympathised with its aim to translate a coherent philosophy of education into practical politics.¹⁰⁹

Gaitskell himself coined the phrase 'a grammar school education for all' in a speech at Morden Park, Surrey, on 5 July.¹¹⁰ This speech, indeed, provided a succinct statement of Labour's general position. Gaitskell emphasised that he did not wish to

abandon grammar school education or the traditions of the grammar school. The aim of this policy, he insisted, was to greatly widen opportunities for all children to receive what was currently called a grammar school education, and for grammar school standards, in the form of higher quality education, to be extended more generally. He was clear that the prevailing segregated system was harmful and that it required reform, but equally firm in his view that LEAs should be given latitude, with local conditions taken into account. A single form of comprehensive school was not the only answer to the problem, he affirmed; rather, Labour would seek a comprehensive system.¹¹¹ It was this system that Circular 10/65 aimed to promote when Labour eventually returned to power.

5. The great experiment

There is a direct connection between the internal party debates that led to the publication of Learning to Live, and the release of Circular 10/65 seven years later. It is true that Labour lost the general election held in October 1959, and a further five years were to pass before it won, by a narrow margin, in 1964. By then, too, Hugh Gaitskell had died, and Harold Wilson became party leader and then prime minister in his stead. To some extent the nature of education policy had also moved on over this time, with the Ministry of Education now showing an increased interest in intervening actively in the school curriculum, much to the alarm of the LEAs. Michael Stewart had also moved to another position while in Opposition, this time to housing and local government.

However, when Labour came to power, Wilson turned to Stewart to take charge of education, and Stewart was able to take advantage of the time he had spent planning for such an opportunity while in Opposition in the late 1950s. This was certainly the

view of Norman Morris as he looked back on these events many years later. According to Morris, Learning to Live, drafted mainly by Stewart, became his 'blue print' when he took office in 1964.¹¹² Morris insisted that Stewart 'would have remembered what he wrote when he became Secretary of State six years later'.¹¹³ The type of comprehensive organisation developed in each locality, he recalled, was 'less a matter of educational philosophy than of practical feasibility'. Although Circular 10/65 only requested rather than directed the LEAs to reorganise their secondary schools, Morris concluded, 'the strategy which we laid down in 1958 was being followed just as we had planned'.¹¹⁴ The final decision to 'request' rather than require was ultimately a 'tactical judgement'.¹¹⁵

Morris's memory of these events and his retrospective claims are also borne out by Stewart's account in his autobiography. Stewart recalled that when he was appointed as the secretary of state for education and science, his first Cabinet paper was on his plans for comprehensivisation. In setting out the arguments for the comprehensive principle and the different kinds of organisation through which this principle could be put into practice, 'I was following closely the Party pamphlet Learning to Live which I had helped to prepare some years before'.¹¹⁶ Stewart was in charge of education for only three months before he was moved to the Foreign Office and Anthony Crosland took over, but this was the key period in which policy on the comprehensive schools was agreed within the Government.

In the final months of 1964, initial consultation took place on Stewart's plans. Representatives of the National Union of Teachers emphasised their right to be consulted on schemes that affected their professional status and livelihood, suggesting that increased public interest in education, while welcome, was not always well informed.¹¹⁷ The deputy secretary for schools, Wilma Harte, also made clear the

strength of the residual opposition to comprehensive schools. She pointed out that opponents would raise objections to the likelihood of comprehensives becoming neighbourhood schools and then reflecting the differences between more affluent and poorer neighbourhoods within the same city such as London: 'In practice parents in, say, Putney or Hampstead are not going to send their children to schools in Islington or Hackney in order to make room for Islington and Hackney children in Putney and Hampstead schools.'¹¹⁸

By the start of 1965, consultation had progressed to the Cabinet's social services committee, which received a paper proposing that LEAs should be requested to reorganise their secondary schools on comprehensive lines.¹¹⁹ Nevertheless, Labour's plans remained highly controversial and contested. In January 1965, the Conservative Opposition chose to raise the subject of comprehensive education in a debate in the House of Commons. This highlighted the political controversy that continued to surround comprehensive education, even though the Conservative spokesman for education, Edward Boyle, had some sympathy for this approach.¹²⁰ It was in this debate that Stewart announced his intention to send a circular to LEAs asking them to submit plans for the reorganisation of their secondary schools on comprehensive lines.¹²¹ Stewart advised his Cabinet colleagues before the debate that in general the comprehensive principle would need to be implemented by using the existing stock of buildings. He took care to emphasise that this move would promote educational opportunities for all children as well as allowing as much latitude as possible for LEAs to address local circumstances.¹²² During the debate itself, on 21 January 1965, Stewart began his own speech by quoting from Learning to Live, observing also that it would not be necessary, at least initially, to amend the 1944 Act.¹²³

It was also at this stage that some of the further consequences of the new policy began to be discerned. A private note to the prime minister a few days before the debate pointed out that while the use of existing school buildings made sense in principle, in practice it would mean that 'comprehensive schools will, from the outset, vary in efficiency and attractiveness according to the "existing buildings" of which they are composed'. Indeed, 'To this extent differences of status and "esteem" will be liable to be built into the system, and some comprehensive schools will already be "better" than others.'¹²⁴ It was felt that this argument should not be given undue weight, but that 'we should be careful of highlighting the fact that comprehensive schools will have to be based mainly in existing buildings'.¹²⁵

Successive drafts of the new Circular were discussed line by line with interested groups in the early months of 1965. One draft paragraph that attracted particular attention, for example, was one on the school community (paragraph 40 in the fourth draft of the Circular, eventually revised to become paragraph 36). The fourth draft of the Circular, dated 14 March, noted that poor schools in some areas might come to be considered as 'poor relations'.¹²⁶ A number of groups including the National Association of Schoolmasters, the County Councils Association and the Headmasters Association raised strong objections to this prospect, and noted that any safeguards would be likely to be ineffective.¹²⁷ This was not a satisfactory outcome of the consultation, but DES officials examining the key points that had arisen eventually admitted that it was 'not feasible to say more about these problems in the Circular'. Indeed, they noted, 'Some will be fundamentally insoluble. In other cases piecemeal solutions will be possible; but these are essentially difficulties to be tackled on the ground.'¹²⁸

6. Conclusions

So it was, then, that Circular 10/65 was finally issued on 12 July 1965. The document had emerged from a quarter-century of debate over the comprehensive schools, and reflected to some degree the doubts and reservations, as well as the hopes and aspirations, that had been expressed during that time. In many respects it was a hidden legacy of the 1944 Act, shaped by the assumptions that underlay the Act and produced in accordance with its provisions. In particular, it was strongly influenced by the limited role allocated to the Ministry of Education and the notions of partnership underlying the policy regime imbued by the Act. There is much scope for further research to be developed on the different groups involved in policies on comprehensive education over the past seventy years, employing a wide range of sources, methodologies, and theoretical perspectives.

Above all, and contrary to the idea that the Labour Party in opposition had done little planning for this initiative, it had in fact planned it in great detail. The Gaitskellite origins of Circular 10/65 demonstrate the cautious and avowedly realistic nature of Labour's policy. They highlight also the fundamental doubts about the future of comprehensive schools that had been harboured throughout the debate. The fate of Abrams' survey of 1957 was to be excluded from the subsequent discussion, but it still helped to reinforce the emphasis on ability and opportunity, as distinct from equality, that was developed in Learning to Live and in the policy debates that followed. It provides an interesting example of public opinion polling at an early stage in its development and of the political decision making that resulted from it. In the light of these arguments and the nature of their resolution, it is the contribution of Michael Stewart rather than that of Anthony Crosland that comes to the fore.

Here also is the answer to Simon's key question about Labour's supposed lack of strength of purpose and political will. The Labour leadership was persuaded that

separatism and the eleven-plus examination must be ended, but addressed the constraints of the regime introduced by the 1944 Act and the likely expense of rapid comprehensivisation with a pragmatic and measured approach. Underlying this also were residual reservations about the comprehensive school as a policy and a preference for diversity that had been inherited from earlier policy makers. It drew on a wide range of strands of opinion within the party, from strong commitment to doubt, equivocation and resistance. In doing so, it succeeded in channelling a potentially very expensive commitment into practical reform.

At the same time, the Labour Party's cautious reformism also helps to explain the limitations in the policy reform that ultimately emerged with Circular 10/65. The acceptance that existing buildings would have to be used in implementing the 'great experiment' meant that social differences between different local areas became an increasingly evident factor in determining inequalities in secondary education. Arguably it was this geographical and social dimension underpinning secondary education policy that began to fuel opposition and the development of new alternatives. As Labour's study group had anticipated as early as 1957, subsequent Conservative governments remained unconvinced by comprehensive education. By the end of the century, a new Labour government under Tony Blair became determined to 'modernise' the comprehensive schools, and initiatives to reintroduce choice and diversity regained centre stage.¹²⁹ The apogee of comprehensive education as a national policy contained internal tensions that would return to haunt it in the decades to come.

NOTES

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³ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

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⁶ B. Simon, 'The politics of comprehensive reorganisation: a retrospective analysis', History of Education, 21/4 (1992), pp. 355-62.

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⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 360. See also B. Simon, Education and the Social Order, 1940-1990, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1991, especially chapter 6.

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¹⁶ Simon, 'The politics of comprehensive reorganisation', p. 360.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ See G. McCulloch, Documentary Research in Education, History and the Social Sciences, Routledge, London, 2004, especially Chapter 4.

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²² D. Lawton, Education and Labour Party Ideologies 1900-2001 and Beyond, RoutledgeFalmer, London, 2005, p. 65.

²³ N. Rao, 'Labour and education: secondary school reorganisation and the neighbourhood school', Contemporary British History, 16/2 (2002), pp. 99-120.

²⁴ On Gaitskell's life and political career, see P. Williams, Hugh Gaitskell: A Political Biography, Jonathan Cape, London, 1979; and B. Brivati, Hugh Gaitskell, Richard Cohen Books, London, 1996.

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³⁶ Minutes of first meeting of Norwood committee, 18 October 1941, minute 2, Statement by the Chairman (Board of Education papers, Ed.136/681).

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⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Memorandum Re 155, 'Education', for Labour Party working party on education, June 1957 (Stewart papers, STWT 9/2/12).

⁸³ Labour Party study group on education, 3rd meeting, 16 July 1957, minute 3 (Stewart papers, STWT 9/2/12).

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ Ibid. The minutes were in fact amended at the following meeting of the study group, on 18 September 1957, to allow for the prospect of some legislation being required and for a Minister to be able to speed up local development plans where there were uncooperative LEAs.

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¹¹⁰ H. Gaitskell, press statement, speech at Co-operative Day celebrations at Morden Park, Surrey, 5 July 1958 (Stewart papers, STWT 9/2/5).

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² N. Morris to B. Simon, 6 July 1989 (Simon papers, SIM/4/4/75).

¹¹³ N. Morris, 'Notes on Circular 10/65' [n.d.; October 1989?] (Simon papers, SIM/4/4/76).

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ N. Morris to B. Simon, 7 May 1990 (Simon papers, SIM/4/4/76).

¹¹⁶ Stewart, Life and Labour, p. 131.

¹¹⁷ Note of meeting at DES with representatives of the National Union of Teachers and the Joint Four, 23 November 1964 (DES papers, Comprehensive education: Circular 10/65, ED.147/826).

¹¹⁸ W. Harte, 'Comments on Secretary of State's draft paper on comprehensive education dated 29.12.64' [n.d.; 1964-65] (DES papers, Comprehensive education, Circular 10/65.1965, ED.147/827A).

¹¹⁹ Revised paper for Cabinet social services committee, 'Comprehensive secondary education', 5 January 1965 (DES papers, ED.147/827A).

¹²⁰ See D. Crook, 'Edward Boyle: Conservative champion of comprehensives?', History of Education, 22/1 (1993), pp. 49-62.

¹²¹ Conclusions of a meeting of the Cabinet held on Tuesday 19 January 1965, minute 3 (Cabinet papers, CAB.128/39, National Archives).

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Hansard, House of Commons Debates, debate on Education (Comprehensive system and grammar schools), 21 January 1965, vol. 705, cols. 413-541.

¹²⁴ Note to prime minister, 18 January 1965, 'Comprehensive secondary education' (Prime Minister's papers, National Archives, PREM.13/3168).

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Fourth draft of Circular on reorganisation of secondary education, 14 March 1965 (DES papers, ED.47/827B)

¹²⁷ For example, Notes of meeting between Secretary of State with the National Association of Schoolmasters, 25 May 1965; AMC, 'Department of Education and Science draft Circular entitled "The Organisation of Secondary Education": comments of the Education Committee of the Association', 3 June 1965; CCA, 'Observations on the draft circular by the Department of Education and Science on "The Organisation of Secondary Education"', 11 June 1965 (DES papers, ED.147/827B).

¹²⁸ M.L. James, 'Draft Circular on the organisation of secondary education: results of consultation with bodies outside the Department', 18 June 1965 (DES papers, ED.147/827C).

¹²⁹ C. Chitty, 'Selection fever', The Guardian Education supplement, 13 October 1998, pp. 4-5; C. Chitty, New Labour and Secondary Education, 1997-2010, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2013.

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