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Ten characters who shaped a school system.

1870 – 2020: 150 Years Of Universal Education In England

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Introduction.

I have been looking forward to the 150th anniversary of universal elementary education in England for a while. It is a significant anniversary. Unfortunately, until recently, I didn't come across many who knew it was approaching, even in the DfE. Contrast that to the 70th anniversary of the NHS in 2018; it was actively promoted across the country and resulted in a major funding boost from the Treasury. We should reflect on that.

In any case, we should all be grateful that FED decided, part way through the anniversary year, to do something about it. Credit to them. Now it is firmly on the calendar, at their request, I've enjoyed putting this brief history together very rapidly, rather than in more considered fashion. In the circumstances, it inevitably has its limitations – I've sought to convey impressions rather than a comprehensive narrative.

Any attempt to summarise so briefly, 150 years of history is bound to be highly selective. Each of the ten characters I've picked made a highly significant contribution – but I could easily have picked ten others, or even twenty, that might have made the list too. I hope, nevertheless, that these ten enable the narrative to emerge and the story to engage.

Throughout, I have taken a national and political perspective, focusing on activities in Westminster and Whitehall – legislation and reports, speeches and budgets. That too was a choice I made. It would have been perfectly possible to write an entirely different history of these years, selecting instead outstanding educators, researchers, local government administrators and union leaders. Equally, the story could have been written from the point of view of children and young people or teachers.

There were no women ministers in the first 75 years. In fact, for almost 50 years after the 1870 Act, women were not even entitled to vote. Ellen Wilkinson became the first woman to be Minister of Education in 1945, exactly the half-way point in the 150 years. In the years since then I have picked out three women and three men.

I have taken the story up to 1988. I stopped there because, from Kenneth Baker onwards, the sixteen Secretaries of State for Education through to the present are still making history. In this account, Kenneth Baker is the bridge between the ten characters from history and the contemporary sixteen. When I mentioned to him once that I had known all the Secretaries of State since his time, he trumped me by saying that he had known all but two since the War. He is certainly still thriving.

In the conclusion I have briefly summarised some common themes of these 150 years; themes that may perhaps be characteristically English. Can we learn from them? No doubt we can and should; but we should also remember AJP Taylor's aphorism that historians learn from the mistakes of the past only how to make new mistakes.

W.E. Forster and the 1870 Elementary Education Act

Source: Britannica.com, 2020

1) Who was W.E. Forster?

Forster was brought up in Dorset, the child of Quaker preachers. He became a self-made manufacturer in Bradford and, eventually, MP for Bradford. He was awkward in manner but had the good fortune to marry into the country's leading education family. His wife, Jane, was the daughter of the famous Thomas Arnold of Rugby School and the sister of the even more famous Matthew Arnold, school inspector and literary critic. Forster had taken a consistent interest in education locally and in Parliament. When Gladstone formed his first administration in December 1868, he appointed Forster as vice-president of the council with responsibility for education. The new government had made a clear commitment to education reform during the election campaign, so the appointment of Forster was significant. He brought to the role not just commitment to the cause, but also loyalty to the government and pragmatic, practical turn of mind that enabled him to work through the detail.

2) Why 1870?

In 1867 Parliament passed the second great Reform Act, extending the franchise to millions of men, all who were householders, which meant that for the first time many working men had the vote. In the election the following year, the expanded electorate voted for Gladstone's Liberals in droves, enabling Gladstone to replace Disraeli as Prime Minister and form his first ministry. Across the political spectrum there was support for education reform – the fear of how large numbers of uneducated voters might change the country was real. "I believe it will be absolutely necessary to compel our future masters to learn their letters," observed Robert Lowe. More positively, out in the country, with leadership, for example, from Joseph Chamberlain and George Dixon in the City of Birmingham, and others in the increasingly influential industrial cities, there was a mass campaign for universal elementary education.

There was no minister of education at that time. It fell to W.E. Forster, as vice-president of the council, to deliver on Gladstone's promise to the country and take the Bill through Parliament. This he did with assiduous care through the Spring and Summer of 1870. His main challenge, as it would be for his successors into the mid-20th Century and even beyond, was with religious questions. Joseph Chamberlain and many non-conformists opposed the idea that their children should have Anglican doctrine imposed upon them in the new schools that would be established. The Cowper-Temple clause provided the compromise – in the new schools, religious education would be Christian but non-denominational, based on the Bible and hymns. Even after the Act had Royal Assent in August 1870 there was continuing controversy over ratepayers' money subsidising education in Anglican and Catholic schools.

3) Why wasn't universal primary education already available?

Universal primary education had been provided for half a century in, for example, Prussia or New York State in the US, but in England, not yet. The Anglican and Catholic Churches both provided thousands of primary schools but it was not by any means universally available. There had been some state subsidy for some but in the laissez-faire decades of early and mid-Victorian England, there was no political appetite for the state to secure universal provision.

The result was that in 1870 out of 80,000 children of school age (5 – 13) in Liverpool as many as 20,000 of them were not in school at all. Among the big and growing cities of industrial England, Liverpool was not unusual.

4) What was the main achievement of the 1870 Education Act?

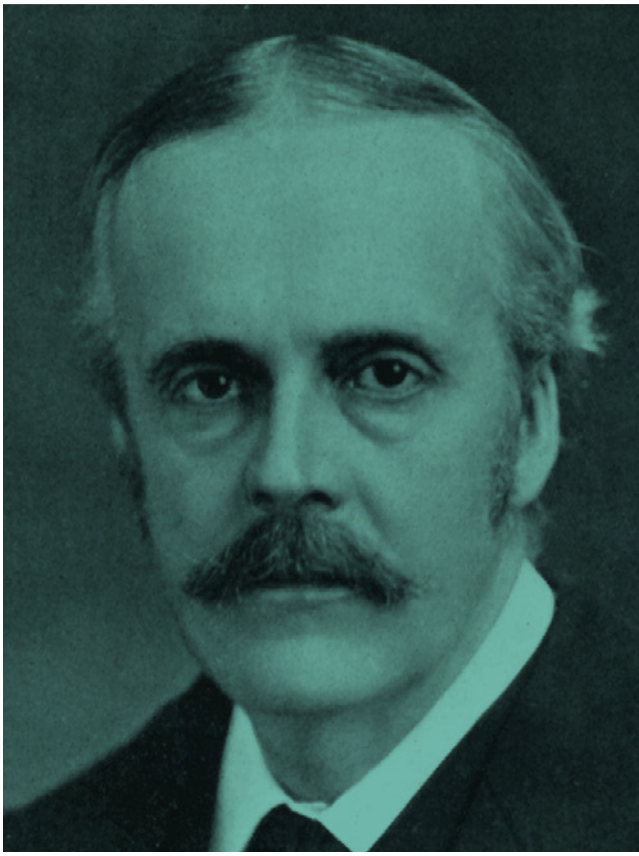
It established universal elementary education by setting up school boards across the country. Their task was to provide elementary schools where the churches had left gaps. In keeping with Victorian attitudes to government, local administration would do the work. "I really do wish my honourable friends," pleaded Forster in the second reading debate, "would have a little more confidence...in municipal government elected by the ratepayers."

At this point, universal elementary education did not mean free or compulsory education. On 1 July 1870, while the Bill was in Committee, George Dixon had suggested an amendment proposing that education under the Act should be free, because in time it should also be compulsory, but he admitted he did not expect much support. He had to wait until 1880 to see this enacted.

5) What else was happening in 1870?

3 January	**Construction of Brooklyn Bridge began**
5 March	**The first ever international football match between England and Scotland at the Oval**
June	**Charles Dickens died**
July	**Franco-Prussian War began**
August	**Maria Montessori born**

A.J. Balfour and the 1902 Education Act



Source: Wikipedia, 2020

1) Who was A.J. Balfour?

Unlike Forster, Balfour was born to rule; "the last grandee" as his biographer described him. During the passage of his 1902 Education Bill, he did in fact become Prime Minister. His uncle, Lord Salisbury stood down, having had enough after 13 years as PM (in three separate terms of office). Also, for Salisbury (and many others), the death of Queen Victoria the year before had marked the end of an era. Balfour represented the up-and-coming generation. He was the only candidate – almost as if his succession had been assumed – and the entire House cheered when he first faced the Commons. Even though he was now PM, he saw it as his duty personally to see the Education legislation through to Royal Assent. He was advised throughout by the formidable Robert Morant, one of the most influential civil servants in educational history.

Balfour's three years as PM were not happy ones but he remained a significant figure in public life for many more years, including becoming Foreign Secretary in Lloyd George's wartime coalition and in that role issuing the Balfour Declaration, in which the British government committed itself to supporting the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine.

2) Why 1902?

What put education at the top of the agenda that year was the Cockerton judgment of 1899, upheld in the courts in 1901. This denied that school boards had the legal power to fund secondary education, even though many had been doing so for years. Balfour saw an opportunity for substantial reform, especially since the English system looked so muddled and ineffective compared to the German, French or American equivalents.

There was growing public support for reform too, including from the increasingly influential labour movement. The Labour Representation Committee, which in 1906 became the Labour Party, had been founded in 1900.

3) What were the problems?

Apart from the damaging court ruling, the central question was the need to expand secondary education to strengthen both the economy and Britain's capacity to rule its Empire. Embarrassingly for the British government, City of London firms were preferring German to English clerks because of their markedly higher standard of education. Meanwhile, the Boer War had revealed just how many young men were unfit for the military. Forty to sixty percent of volunteers for the Army had been turned down on medical grounds. "... in the rookeries and slums..." said the great imperialist, Lord Roseberry, "an imperial race cannot be reared."

Meanwhile the labour movement saw the huge gap between the private schools providing for the ruling classes and the modest elementary education available to the children of the working classes.

4) What were the main achievements of the 1902 Education Act?

It abolished the school boards and gave local authorities the responsibility for both primary and secondary education. This was a major advance. It also forged a controversial deal under which much needed state funding could be channelled by local authorities to Anglicans and Catholic schools in return for some local authority influence over them. Hence the vociferous opposition from non-conformists in the mass protests to "Rome on the rates." The controversy of 1870, far from abating, had intensified. The young Lloyd George was in the forefront of the campaign against the Bill.

5) Was it worth the row?

It took 57 days of Parliamentary debate to reach the statute book and it would have been longer still had it not been for one of the earliest recorded uses of "the guillotine" to restrict the length of debate (by contrast, the 1870 Act had taken just 22 days of Parliamentary time).

The religious aspect of the controversy tested Balfour's patience. He commented in exasperation, "It is now equally clear to me that the clergy, of whatever school, are equally stupid, I had thought the range of stupidity more limited." If Twitter had existed at the time, this comment would surely have been career-limiting. Churchill was a young MP at the time and the divisive 1902 debates put him off major education reform for decades.

Still, Balfour's Act did establish universal primary education as part of every local authority's responsibility and unleashed rapid growth of secondary education. Sidney Webb, an austere commentator and founder of the LSE (also in 1902) and by no means a natural supporter of Balfour, commented, "For the first time we have made education a public function, simply as education without definition or limit..."

It didn't do Balfour any good in the short term. His Conservative Party lost the next election. The next time education reform reached the top of the agenda in 1918, Balfour was Foreign Secretary and his nemesis from 1902, Lloyd George, was Prime Minister.

6. What else happened in 1902?

March	**Real Madrid FC founded**
May	**Treaty of Vereeniging ends the Boer War**
September	**The first ever sci-fi film: A Trip to the Moon**
October	**The first Borstal opened in Borstal, Kent**

H.A.L. Fisher and the 1918 Education Act

Source: Wikipedia, 2020

1) Who was H.A.L. Fisher?

H.A.L. Fisher was a classic of the type that Peter Hennessy characterises as "a good chap." He was vice-chancellor of Sheffield University when Lloyd George, on becoming Prime Minister in December 1916, appointed him President of the Board of Education. Many years later, Fisher wrote *A History of Europe*, published in 1936, while he was Warden of New College, Oxford. In 1940, with the country at war again, he volunteered his services for government again but was sadly run over by a lorry on Millbank and killed. He had been an impressive President of the Board of Education under Lloyd George and took the 1918 Education Act through Parliament in that last year of the First World War. "It was a happy day," Herbert Lewis wrote to Lloyd George, "when you sent him to the Board of Education."

Similarly, Fisher came to admire Lloyd George; "His animated courage and buoyancy of temper, his gift of speech and inconquerable sense of fun, injected a cheerfulness..."

2) Why 1918?

Lloyd George wanted major improvement in social provision after the War. He thought the people should be rewarded for the sacrifice war had entailed. Making progress on education, even before the War was over, would be a first step. Education, said Fisher, "dispels the hideous clouds of class suspicion...". Fisher sensed the public mood was with him. "Everywhere the halls were packed ... I have never encountered such enthusiasm," he concluded. After the Russian Revolution of the previous year, there was also fear that if the government didn't move decisively, Bolshevism might become a threat at home.

3) What was the problem?

The promise of the 1902 Education Act had not been fulfilled. The children of the working classes were often still excluded from secondary education by both fees and lack of available places. In fact, many children under 14 were still in employment.

4) What were the main achievements of the 1918 Education Act?

The most important achievement of the 1918 Act was compulsory schooling to age 14, alongside strict limits on employing children under 14. Local education authorities were also given a duty to provide for the progressive development of education in their areas in return for extra funding. Tantalisingly, the Act also legislated for day continuation classes, one day per week for 40 weeks a year, for all young people aged 14 to 18. This might have been transformational, but opposition from business meant this section was postponed for seven years and ultimately never implemented, a tragic missed opportunity. As the TES said at the time, "A powerful group of employers...are determined to retain child labour..."

Alongside the Act, Fisher also established the Burnham Committee through which teachers' pay was negotiated until the late 1980s, and also the University Grants Committee, which channelled funding direct from the Treasury to the growing number of universities. It also lasted into the 1980s.

5) What else was happening in 1918?

All year	**Conflict on the Western Front ultimately left Germany in retreat**
All year	**Civil War in Russia**
All year	**The Spanish flu pandemic resulting, eventually, in an estimated 50 million deaths worldwide**
February	**Representation of the People Act gives women age 30 and upwards the vote for the first time**
March	**First episode of James Joyce's Ulysses published in a US magazine**
11 November	**Armistice**

Eric Geddes and the (In)Famous Geddes Axe of 1921

Source: Wikipedia, 2020

1) Who was Eric Geddes?

Geddes was born in India and educated at a series of English public schools where he enjoyed rugby more than study – in fact, as the DNB puts it, he "was required to leave most of the schools he attended." Starting on the bottom rung of the railways in the US before returning to Britain, he eventually became a successful manager and businessman in the industry. His can-do attitude and problem-solving prowess brought him prominence during the First World War; Lloyd George appointed him to solve a series of logistical problems – shell production and convoys, for example. After the War, Lloyd George appointed him Britain's First Minister of Transport. In 1921, with the economy suffering, Lloyd George turned to him again and made him Chairman of the Committee on National Expenditure, with the express purpose of cutting public expenditure; he carried out the task with such thoroughness that it became known as the Geddes Axe.

2) Why 1921?

In a deep post-war depression, the economy was suffering. Tax revenues and Lloyd George's reputation were suffering too. Lloyd George wanted to reassure the backbenchers in his coalition that he was vigorously controlling public expenditure, that, as we'd put it today, he had a grip. As an MP whom Lloyd George respected, Geddes was just the man for the job.

3) What was the main impact on education of the Geddes Axe?

Geddes was looking for savings across the board – the military, for example – but he was particularly harsh on education. Perhaps he remembered all those schools that had asked him to leave. In December 1921 the Committee recommended taking £18 million out of a total expenditure on education of £50 million, an eye-watering 36 per cent cut. Nothing like it has ever been proposed since. Geddes spelled out exactly how this could be achieved.

"This can only be done by raising the lower age limit (start school age 6, not 5), by putting more pupils under one teacher and paying the teachers less, and we think the teachers and Education Authorities should be asked to face this fact."

4) What were the consequences?

The Cabinet vigorously debated the Geddes proposals; its attitudes were softened by the loss of crucial by-elections in Manchester and Camberwell, in both of which opposition to the proposed education cuts featured strongly. In the end, they settled on making around a third of the cuts, still a swingeing 12 percent reduction, but decided against delaying the start of school to age 6. Fisher, still President of the Board of Education, tried to put a brave face on it in public; he predicted that in two or three years, "the clouds will pass away." This proved optimistic.

The hopes and dreams unlocked during the War and given substance in Fisher's Education Act, were put on hold for a generation. Percival Sharp, then the Director of Education in Sheffield and later a major influence on the 1944 legislation, commented, "In the Fisher Act, we had the shining vision of the practical idealist, today all is dark..." In Lowestoft and a number of other local education authorities, teachers went on strike.

The 1920s and 1930s were unhappy decades for state education.

R.A. Butler and the 1944 Education Act

Source: Wikipedia, 2020

1) Who was R.A. Butler?

Known as RAB throughout his political life, Butler was born into family with historic links to Cambridge University and the Conservative Party. Almost inevitably in 1929, at the age of 26, he was elected MP for Saffron Walden. During the 1930s he had clashed with Churchill over both India and appeasement so when Churchill became wartime Prime Minister in 1940, Butler had little reason to expect his career to progress. To his surprise, in 1941, Churchill asked him to become President of the Board of Education in the wartime coalition and there "introduce a note of patriotism into the schools." Butler saw the post, in his own words, as "a backwater" (as did Churchill) but, still not forty, he also saw the opportunity to make his mark if only he could marshal through Parliament a great reforming piece of legislation. He was supported throughout by his loyal Labour deputy, James Chuter Ede.

2) Why 1944?

Following the Geddes cuts, progress on education had been dismal in the 1920s and 30s. The early years of the War were taken up with evacuation and, in any case, Churchill would not countenance any controversial education reform while the outcome of the War hung in the balance – he remembered, from his time as a young MP, how damaging the controversy over the 1902 Act had been.

Even so, Churchill and the Cabinet were only too aware of the build-up of a mass movement in the country for the building of a better Britain, a New Jerusalem, after the War. They knew that this time there could be no betrayal of those hopes, as there had been with Geddes in 1921.

Eventually, on the morning of 12 March 1943, at Chequers, after a lengthy dinner the previous evening, Butler got to see Churchill who was in bed with a large cut curled up on his feet. From Butler's point of view the conversation began unpromisingly. "That cat has done more for the war effort than you have, Butler," the PM began, but Butler was nothing, if not a man of tact; "I'm not sure about that," he replied, "But it is a very beautiful cat." This was perfect; he went on to gain Churchill's (perhaps reluctant) approval for a White Paper and an Education Bill. The White Paper was published in July 1943 and the Bill introduced to Parliament in January 1944.

3) Why was it necessary?

Just under half of children in 1939 attended all-age (5-14) elementary schools with most of the rest attending 5-11 primary schools and 11-14 senior elementary schools. Secondary education for all remained elusive. The children of the middle and upper classes generally progressed to grammar schools, or through the entirely separate private system, but as many as 80 percent of all children received no further formal education after the age of 14.

Furthermore, evacuation had opened the eyes of the better-off to just how deprived many children of the urban poor were. In a comically sad comment, one East End boy evacuated to rural Somerset, wrote home to say, "they call this Spring. They have one down here every year."

As the ferment for that New Jerusalem after the War grew ever stronger, secondary education for all was prominent among the demands. Also, on a practical level, after two decades of inadequate investment, the Anglican and Catholic schools were underfunded and often in a state of dilapidation. They may have feared state interference, but they knew they needed state funding even more. Eventually, even Churchill began to see the value of moving on education before the War was over.

4) What were the main achievements of the 1944 Education Act?

> Raising of the school leaving age to 15 (and in time – in 1972 – to 16).

> Secondary education for all, at last.

> A historic compromise with the Anglican and Catholic churches allowing the establishment of voluntary-aided and voluntary-controlled schools.

> The creation of the Ministry of Education replacing the Board of Education.

> A new purpose for education; "... it shall be the duty of the local education authority for every area, so far as their powers extend, to contribute towards the spiritual, moral, mental and physical development of the community..."

> In effect, though not on the face of the legislation, the creation of two routes through secondary education; grammar schools for those who passed the 11+ (15-20 percent of the cohort) and secondary moderns for the rest.

> Vocational education, and specifically the technical schools mentioned in the Act, were neglected in the implementation.

5. What else happened in 1944?

January	**Siege of Leningrad lifted**
March	**Hayek's The Road to Serfdom published**
6 June	**D-Day landings**
24 August	**Liberation of Paris**
8 September	**First V-2 rocket lands in London**
December	**The film National Velvet released, Elizabeth Taylor becomes a star**

Ellen Wilkinson and the 1945 Decision to Raise the School Leaving Age to 15

Source: turbulentlondon.com, 2016

1) Who was Ellen Wilkinson?

Born in Manchester, she benefited from her parents, especially her father's, passion for education. In 1910, she won a scholarship to study history at the University of Manchester, extremely rare for a woman at that time. Elected to Parliament in the 1920s, she represented Middlesbrough and then Jarrow, where she participated in the famous Jarrow March. Short in stature and red-headed, she became known as Red Ellen and published Jarrow's story (*The Town that was Murdered*). "Jarrow's plight is not a local problem," she argued, "it is a symptom of a national evil."

When Atlee won the 1945 election, he appointed her Minister of Education, the first woman to hold the office.

2) Why 1945?

The 1944 Education Act had reached the statute book the previous August but the massive task of implementation had barely begun. There were many war-damaged schools and a rapidly rising child population as the post-war baby boom began; and all that on top of the problems left by education's neglect in the 1920s and 1930s.

3) What did she do?

She fought vigorously in Cabinet in August and September 1945 for the implementation of the new school leaving age of 15, and for the resources to do so. The Chancellor of the Exchequer, Hugh Dalton, proposed delay because he believed neither the resources nor the manpower were available. He had been rather patronising about Wilkinson in the past – she "makes an impassioned defence with sobs in her throat, but it really isn't very convincing" – but now she more than met his match. She argued that delay would mean momentum would be lost and that the children of the working classes would suffer most; whenever governments face trouble, education was always the first casualty, she said. The Cabinet backed her over the Chancellor.

The Dictionary of National Biography (DNB) summarised her impact well: "Choosing a few key areas for special effort, she won the resources and provided the necessary drive... to ensure free school milk and school meals, smaller classes, extensive school building, [and] a school leaving age raised to fifteen..."

In February 1947, on a freezing evening in one of the most dreadful winters of the 20th century, she opened the Old Vic Theatre School, its roof still open to the elements as a result of bomb damage during the War. She caught pneumonia and died shortly afterwards in St Mary's Hospital, Paddington.

4. What were the consequences?

She set the tone for the post-war implementation of the 1944 settlement. Real energy was unleashed, especially at local education authority level. As one chief education officer wrote, looking back, "there was, of course, too much of everything to be done at once...no hours enough in the seven days...tremendously invigorating..." – very different from the early 1920s.

The post-war expansion was dramatic. In 1938 education expenditure was 3 percent of GNP; by 1961 it was 4.5 percent. In 1947 there were just over 5 million pupils in maintained schools; by 1965 there were 9.1 million. The number of teachers rose from 175,000 in 1946 to almost 450,000 by 1977. For much of that time too, there was cross-party consensus to focus on expansion. Ellen Wilkinson had set the tone. Later she was criticised for not advancing comprehensive education enough but in 1945 that wasn't the central issue for the vast majority of people; rather, it was how quickly secondary education for all could be made a reality.

Tony Crosland and Circular 10/65

Source: Wikipedia, 2020

1) Who was Tony Crosland?

Tony Crosland was an Oxford intellectual of the left who made a name for himself with what the DNB calls "the unusual combination of hard intellectual endeavour and undisciplined, even riotous relaxation." He was first elected to Parliament in 1950 aged 31, but then lost his seat before returning to Parliament in 1959 as MP for Grimsby, where he remained MP until his death. He made his name as a writer and thinker (*The Future of Socialism* in 1956, being his magnum opus).

Following an unexpected by-election defeat in 1965, Harold Wilson was forced into a reshuffle. As part of it, he first offered the role of Secretary of State for Education and Science to Roy Jenkins but Jenkins preferred to wait until the post of Home Secretary became available. Crosland was Wilson's next choice because he had "always taken a close interest in education". Crosland relished the chance to advance the comprehensive school agenda. He later became most famous for a remark he made to his wife, Susan: "I am going to destroy every f___ grammar school in England. And Wales. And Northern Ireland."

He stayed in the post just over 2 years before becoming Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and then, later, Foreign Secretary. He died in that office in February 1977, age 58, after a cerebral haemorrhage.

2) Why 1965?

Labour had won an election in 1964 and wanted to accelerate the trend towards comprehensive education. The tide, in both Conservative and Labour LEAs, had been running in that direction for some years, as the validity of the 11-plus came into question and doubts were raised about the equity of access to grammar schools. Comprehensive schooling for all had long been a demand of the Labour Left, so Crosland could also enhance his reputation with them (hence perhaps the famous quote).

3) What did he do?

Within months, he published DES circular 10/65 urging LEAs to develop plans for comprehensivisation. The main debate was whether the circular should "request" or "require" LEAs to go comprehensive. In the end, he chose "request", because for most LEAs, that was the direction of travel in any case. However, in 1966, he made access to the extra investment in school buildings conditional on local education authorities agreeing to go comprehensive.

After Crosland moved on, his successors as Secretary of State continued to take the policy forward, including Margaret Thatcher, who held the post for four years in the Heath government from 1970 to 1974.

The truth was, as Harry Judge pointed out at the time, that the grammar schools had plenty of vocal advocates; the secondary moderns had none. A.J.P. Taylor, the most famous historian at the time, commented, "Run away to sea rather than go to a secondary modern."

4) What were the consequences?

By the end of the 1970s the vast majority of secondary schools were comprehensive. Just over 160 grammar schools survived. Curriculum and examinations remained largely unreformed. GCSE wasn't introduced until 1986, 20 years on from Crosland's famous circular. Increasingly, questions were being asked about whether standards were high enough. At their best, comprehensive schools were excellent but, for too many young people, comprehensive schools were little more than secondary modern schools under a different name.

Bridget Horatia Plowden (Nee Richmond) and her 1967 Report Children and their Primary Schools

Source: ncl.ac.uk, 2020

1) Who was Bridget Plowden?

Bridget was born in Yorkshire, the daughter of an Admiral. Her early adult life involved running Brownie packs and working in K shoes in Kendal. Then in 1933 she married a well-connected and successful public servant, Edwin Plowden. After the War, as her children grew up, she herself embarked on a remarkable career in public service and business, which ultimately eclipsed his.

At what turned out to be a crucial moment for her, early in the 1960s, she found herself sitting next to the Secretary of State for Education, Sir Edwards Boyle, at a dinner and must have made a strong impression on him. As a consequence, he appointed her to chair the Central Advisory Council for Education, which had been set up by the 1944 Education Act to examine major questions of education policy. The Council had a number of luminaries among its members including Michael Young, social theorist and author of well-known books on meritocracy, and the famous philosopher, AJ Ayer. Nevertheless, she rapidly established herself as a highly effective chair.

She set her Committee to work on the issue of primary education. The report they eventually produced was years in the making (which at the time was quite normal) but profound in its impact.

2) Why 1967?

Until the early sixties, the content of primary education had, in effect, been dictated by the 11-plus and basic knowledge of history, geography and a little science. But as comprehensive schooling became the norm and the 11-plus marginal, the question arose as to what primary education should be about and how it should be provided, particularly as progressive theories of education were gaining ground.

The Plowden Committee worked assiduously, taking evidence thoroughly, visiting schools and consulting all interested parties. It took them till 1967 to produce their report.

3) What did Children and their Primary Schools recommend?

It ran to 1200 pages – Tolstoy barely did better – but nevertheless broke the record for sales of HMSO publication. More than 150,000 copies were sold within a few months, which suggests it struck a chord far beyond education circles. It was accepted by Tony Crosland, then the Secretary of State and, more than any other single document, reshaped primary education for the post-11-plus era.

It recommended:

> Nursery education for all

> Transfer from primary to secondary school at age 12 rather than 11 – a recommendation that never took off, though it was, and remains, the norm in Scotland

> Reduction in class sizes, by deploying classroom assistants as well as teachers

> Positive discrimination in favour of children in areas of deprivation

> Stronger relationships between schools, parents and communities

> And (just a year too late for me) the abolition of corporal punishment in primary schools.

Though the Report itself was respectful of traditional subjects and of teaching reading through phonics, it became famous for, and associated with, progressive ideas such as learning through discovery and the promotion of creativity. As the DNB judiciously put it, "In less magisterial hands" than Lady Plowden's, the report was damaging to basic standards of literacy and numeracy. Here were the seeds of a controversy which continued for decades.

4) What happened next?

As a result of her report, Lady Plowden became a well-known public figure, regularly visiting primary schools and promoting her message. In today's language, she followed through. As the baby boom passed through primary education there was extensive public debate on the issues she had raised. Later she went on to become chairman of the Independent Broadcasting Authority, which oversaw ITV introducing, among other things, breakfast time television for the first time.

Meanwhile primary education became a matter of controversy, especially in the 1970s and 80s. Many schools and teachers did wonderful work but, without clear accountability, the degree of focus on standards varied significantly. A small but significant minority took an extreme view. Perhaps the most infamous case, which became a cause celebre in the tabloid media in the mid-1970s, was a primary school in Islington, which pushed the limits of teacher autonomy and progressivism far beyond anything envisaged by Lady Plowden. At William Tyndale School, the children were not taught in any fashion and no records were kept. When parents complained, the headteacher commented that he "did not give a damn about parents... or anyone else... teachers were pros at the game... parents were either working-class fascists or middle-class trendies..."

Jim Callaghan, about to become Prime Minister, was reading the newspapers on this school and a handful of others identified by the media, with a growing sense of unease.

5) What else was happening in 1967?

January	**Milton Keynes was designated a new town**
March	**The Torrey Canyon oil spill**
June	**Sgt Pepper's was released by the Beatles and Keith Richards was jailed for possession of illegal drugs**
December	**The first Concorde was unveiled in Toulouse**

Margaret Thatcher and a Framework for Expansion in 1972

Source: The Daily Mail, 2013

1) Who was Margaret Thatcher?

It may seem unnecessary to ask this question; and yet, in relation to her time as Secretary of State for Education, there are some little-known details of her life which seem relevant. For example, in her first few weeks in office during the summer of 1970, she fought robustly in defence of the Open University (OU) against most of the cabinet and won, a noteworthy feat for someone in her first Cabinet position. Back in the 1950s, she had been a young mother studying law and saw the potential of the OU in a way that, perhaps, her colleagues didn't.

Equally unknown is that, during vacations in her undergraduate days at Oxford, she had, if only briefly, been a teacher. She wrote to her sister at the time, "We are working terrifically hard and I have no free periods at all. Also, the marking is heavy." In addition to science, maths and English, she, somewhat implausibly, also found herself teaching boys' swimming. She stood on the poolside and, in her words, tried "to teach them by yelling at them what they are doing wrong." Her brilliant biographer, Charles Moore, suggests this experience was "an early example of her belief, later so familiar to cabinet colleagues, that people, particularly men, never did anything very well unless you stood over them while they did it."

2) Why 1972?

After the famous controversy over the withdrawal of school milk from primary schools, Margaret Thatcher, backed by Prime Minister Ted Heath, wanted to get on the front foot. Her White Paper, A Framework for Expansion, set out a vision for the future of schools including universal pre-school education and a 50 percent increase in funding for education over the coming decade. It was a very establishment and mainstream document that went down well with what Michael Gove later called "the Blob." The Guardian praised it, in words she surely didn't appreciate, as "more than half-way towards a socialist education policy." None of the themes that later became characteristic of Thatcherism appeared in it. Perhaps this was because Ted Heath had insisted, using words echoed in later generations, that she should focus on "structure" not content.

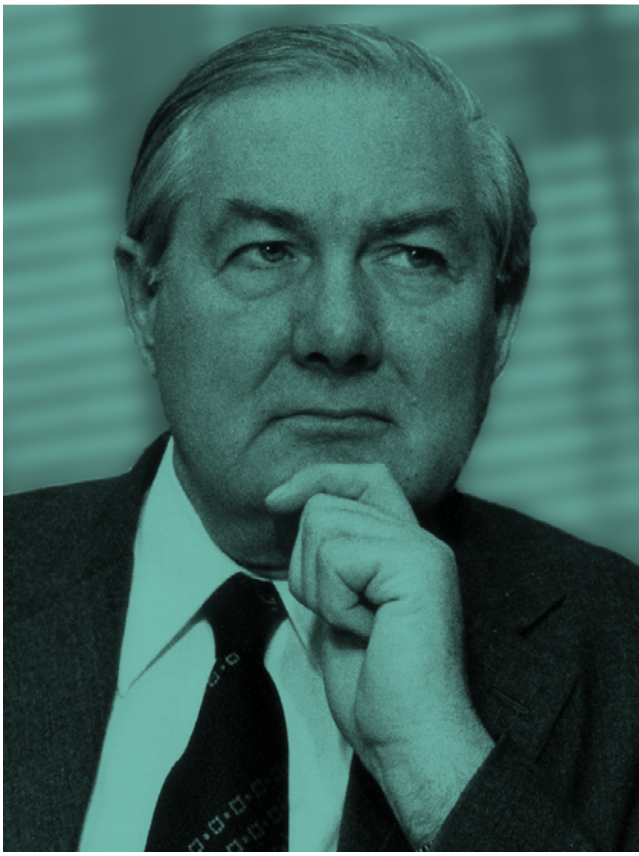
3) What was her impact on schools?

Often forgotten, she did complete Butler's work, finally raising the school leaving age to 16. She also commissioned Alan Bullock, an Oxford historian, to examine standards of reading about which she was concerned. "We are feeding doubts into our children, not beliefs," she remarked. (As a newly minted teacher a few years later, I embarked on a one-person campaign to implement the Bullock Report in Watford, no doubt to negligible effect.)

She had begun, on her first full day in office, by replacing Crosland's circular 10/65 with her own circular 10/70 but the trend towards comprehensive schooling continued unabated. During her time in office, she approved over 3,000 schemes, more than any other Secretary of State, and rejected only 326, though that included the prevention of compulsory comprehensivisation in Birmingham, with lasting consequences for that city.

Perhaps the most momentous consequence of her time in office was the sense of frustration she felt both with the DES and the education establishment in general. This was perhaps exemplified best when she found herself standing in for Ted Heath at the centenary dinner of the National Union of Teachers. (Hard to imagine now – the PM had accepted the invitation.) Her strongest recollection afterwards was the cosy nature of the relationship between her officials and the NUT; "It's a closed world. I saw how closely some of our top officials were with the NUT." Her determination to defeat the teacher strikes a decade or so later when she was Prime Minister, was born in these days. The agenda of standards, accountability and choice – soon to be actively promoted in the so-called Black Papers – had yet to fully emerge but, when it did, it would find fertile ground.

James Callaghan and the 1976 Ruskin Speech



Source: Wikipedia, 2020

1) Who was James Callaghan?

James Callaghan became Prime Minister in April 1976 after Harold Wilson had unexpectedly stepped down. Though by this time Callaghan was in his mid-60s his first words on becoming PM were, "And I never went to University." Nevertheless, he had long experience in politics and government; he had held all three great offices of state, Home Secretary, Chancellor and Foreign Secretary. Much to the consternation of the Department of Education and Science, the new Prime Minister, in spite of the economic challenges of the time, decided to make a personal contribution to the improvement of education about which he had serious concerns. He intended to shift the debate from the ongoing controversy about selection and comprehensives to one about standards and quality. He had been shocked by the stories of schools such as William Tyndale and the apparent lack of concern the education establishment had for parents and business.

2) Why 1976?

Callaghan wanted to make an impact on education as soon as he became Prime Minister. His government, though, was beset by economic problems. Also, he soon found himself dealing with the drought that resulted from the hottest, driest summer on record. As a result, it was October before he found time for an education speech. He chose Ruskin College because it was symbolic of people from a working-class background achieving the highest educational standards.

3) What were the main messages of the speech?

There were four.

First, while it had been unusual among his predecessors, it was time for a Prime Minister to make a speech on education. "There is nothing wrong", he said "with non-educationalists, even a prime minister, talking about it now and again."

Second, money alone was not the answer. "There has been a massive injection of resources into education... I fear that those whose only answer to these problems is to call for more money will be disappointed."

Third, quality and content mattered. "Let me repeat some of the fields that need study because they cause concern... the methods and aims of informal instruction; the strong case for the so-called 'core curriculum' of basic knowledge; ...monitoring the use of resources in order to maintain a proper national standard of performance;... the role of the Inspectorate in relation to national standards; and... the need to improve relations between industry and education".

Fourth, there was a need for accountability. "To the teacher I would say you must satisfy parents and industry that what you are doing meets their requirements and the needs of the children for if the public are not convinced, then the profession will be laying up trouble for itself in the future". This warning, ignored at the time, proved uncannily accurate.

4) What happened next?

Callaghan removed Fred Mulley – who had been alarmed by the PM's intervention – from the post of Secretary of State of Education and replaced him with Shirley Williams. She led the famous "Great Debate" on the future of education. She published a Green Paper (much fought over inside government) but not a lot changed because the government was overwhelmed by political and economic challenges. As Callaghan remarked in 1996 reflecting on the lack of progress that followed his famous speech, "I rather blame myself. I was determined not to let the economic thing overshadow everything... but in fact, we were engulfed."

5) So why is the speech so important then?

The significance of the speech is that it set the agenda for the next generation. Callaghan had identified the themes that would dominate the education policy agenda of, at least, the next four Prime Ministers, two Conservative and two Labour.

6) What else happened in 1976?

21 January	**First commercial Concorde flight**
16 March	**Harold Wilson resigns as PM**
June	**Soweto Uprising begins**
July	**Summer Olympics begin in Montreal**
September	**Chairman Mao died**
October	**Milton Friedman wins the Nobel Prize for Economics**
November	**Jimmy Carter wins US Presidential election**

The Eleventh Character: Kenneth Baker

Source: Nicholas Posner, 1989

It fell to Kenneth Baker, through his 1988 Education Reform Act, to end, once and for all, the 1944 education settlement.

In 1986 Baker had taken over from Keith Joseph who spent five years as Secretary of State, much of the time in conflict with the teacher unions over pay. In Cabinet, Margaret Thatcher blocked the settlement he finally reached; new leadership, she thought, was clearly needed. To his credit, in 1986, Joseph had finally introduced GCSE to replace O-Levels and CSEs. 16 year-olds first took the exam in 1988.

Baker's legislation introduced a National Curriculum, national assessment, budgets devolved to schools, the concept of the grant-maintained school, greater parental choice and the abolition of the Inner London Education Authority. Separately, he also abolished the Burnham Committee which negotiated teachers' pay and replaced it with a Review Body.

It is far too early to judge Baker historically because, all these years later, he remains an active proponent of education reform with an article in the Sunday Times on 9 August 2020 to prove it.

We can reach one conclusion though; that all 15 of his successors as Secretary of State have found themselves working within the context of the main ideas of the 1988 legislation – devolve budgets and power to schools, encourage choice, and at the same time set standards centrally and hold schools to account. There is, of course, as we've seen over the last thirty years, plenty of room for controversy within these parameters, but it is easy to miss the common ground. As a result, standards of education since Callaghan have been significantly improved. Many more children and young people are achieving higher standards now than back then. There are far fewer bad schools and many more good schools. At least until the pandemic hit in 2020, there was also impressive evidence of achievement gaps closing. To give one remarkable example, Bangladeshi students overtook the national average in GCSE performance in the last decade, something that was barely imaginable in the 1990s.

Education also has a much higher profile within government and with the public. In the 1930s, one President of the Board of Education described it as "an outpost of the Treasury." Margaret Thatcher described the DES (after she had left) as "an awful place." And when Kenneth Baker moved from Environment to Education in 1986, he said it was like moving from the manager's job at Arsenal to Charlton – "you crossed the river (the DES was then housed in a monstrous tower block next to Waterloo Station) and moved down two divisions."

No-one would argue that was the case now, in spite of the many challenges. Not everyone succeeds there but it is a department in which ministers and civil servants aspire to serve. It is likely to get more important over the next 150 years, not less.

Conclusions:

Lessons from 150 years of Education Reform in England

1. Major education reform requires the backing of a strong Prime Minister (because it's controversial) – see Gladstone 1870, Lloyd George 1918, Churchill 1944 and Thatcher 1988.
2. War accelerates commitment to bold reform, economic crisis delays it. See 1918 and 1921 and 1944 and 1945.
3. It is very English to muddle through on education reform; maybe it works but there have been missed opportunities, and periods of painfully slow development such as the 1920s and 1930s.
4. We have neglected vocational education at almost every turn.
5. The debate about, and tension between, standards and structures stretches back through educational history.
6. The clarity of the legislation drafted has been replaced by complexity. A reasonably well-educated person can read the 1944 Education Act in an evening and understand its intentions. Try that with any education legislation since 1988.
7. The degree of interest in international comparisons and benchmarks ebbs and flows. We never matched Germany before the First World War. Between the wars we didn't even try. After 1945 we moved far and fast on quantity but only started worrying about outcomes in the 1970s. Surprisingly, in spite of the repeated bouts muddling through, the track-record over the last twenty years is good, if not stellar. Global interest in school policy in England rose dramatically from Kenneth Baker's time onwards – under Major, Blair, Brown and Cameron – England became seen as a place of innovation and risk-taking – and our school system now compares reasonably well in international comparisons of reading, writing, maths and science such as PISA, PIRLs and TIMSS.
8. A final consistent theme through the century and a half is the extent to which every successive reform is opposed by those who, like a deadweight, defend the status quo. As much as anything, it seems to be based on a fear of the unknown or of change in general. By far the best response in history to this standard reaction was R. A. Butler's in January 1944. Looking up at the representatives of the churches in the gallery of the House of Commons during his speech on the Second Reading, he rebuked them gently and warmly in language he knew they would understand.

He said, "The best way I can reassure them is by quoting a verse from a hymn:

'Ye fearful saints fresh courage take
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy and shall break
In blessings on your head.' "

Rather than dreading the next 150 years of education reform, let's look forward to the blessings.

Golden ages don't have to be in the past.

Annex 1:

Secretaries of State for Education since Kenneth Baker

John MacGregor July 1989 – November 1990

Kenneth Clarke November 1990 – April 1992

John Patten April 1992 – July 1994

Gillian Shephard July 1994 – May 1997

David Blunkett May 1997 – June 2001

Estelle Morris June 2001 – October 2002

Charles Clarke October 2002 – December 2004

Ruth Kelly December 2004 – May 2006

Alan Johnson May 2006 – June 2007

Ed Balls June 2007 – May 2010

Michael Gove May 2010 – July 2014

Nicky Morgan July 2014 – July 2016

Justine Greening July 2016 – January 2018

Damian Hinds January 2018 – July 2019

Gavin Williamson July 2019 –

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