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Alastair Walker

Introduction

In the 1950s and 60s at the height of the Cold War there was a great deal of debate as to what precisely were the differences between the democratic Western system of government and the system in the Soviet block. As a pupil in a Northern Ireland grammar school, I was taught that one critical difference was that, in the Soviet system, the end was always considered to justify the means, whereas in the democratic West, the means had to be acceptable in their own right. I still consider that distinction to be valid and it is therefore disappointing, not to say ironic, that those who now advocate the continuation of state imposed academic selection in Northern Ireland schools should so ignore it.

The high academic standards at the end of post-primary education achieved by many in Northern Ireland are, we are told, all that is needed to justify selection at 11. So long as we are seeing good grades in GCSE and A level, the stress, the injustices, the sense of rejection and failure that some young children experience as a consequence of selection are the price that has to be paid; regrettable of course, but necessary if the end is to be achieved. No they are not. As we shall see these methods are not required in order to deliver high academic standards – indeed they may be a barrier to even higher ones – and, even if they were, the state imposed separation of young children into different institutions would still not be justified by that end alone.

At the time of writing we appear to be in a sort of no man's land in a process of trench warfare between a Minister who has decided to end selection, inasmuch as it is in her power to do so, and members of opposing parties, also in government, who are equally determined to retain it. Coverage in the news media has been sporadic and, while arguments have been presented on both sides, they tend to be arguments of the moment, with little regard to how we got to where we are now and even less to the situation in other places. It has been a debate

characterised by resort to propaganda and mantra, rarely bothering to take proper account of the evidence or to consider matters of principle. In particular, the pro-selection lobby has relied on a series of myths about education in Northern Ireland that are unworthy of the source from which they come.

Few people are neutral on the issue and I am not one of them. Now retired, I have been an opponent of academic selection as a basis for directing children into post-primary schools since I was in my 20s. Early in my career I was a grammar school teacher in England and head of a Chemistry Department, before returning to Northern Ireland to a post as Assistant Secretary to the Northern Ireland GCE Board. Having also spent time in university research, I am not lacking in appreciation of the virtues of academic study and the desirability of promoting excellence therein. In October 2004 I retired as Head of Education Services in CCEA. As such, my responsibilities included overseeing the setting and marking of the Transfer Tests. That was not an easy assignment for someone who was opposed in principle to selection. Public servants do not have the luxury of only implementing those policies with which they are in agreement.

So, from a child passing what was then known as the Qualifying Examination at the age of 10, to a teacher in a selective system, to a parent of two children who went to grammar schools in Northern Ireland, to a manager in his fifties overseeing the imposition of a similar regime on children two generations on, selection has been a continuing issue throughout my life. Shortly after retirement, perhaps as a way of letting off some of the pent up pressure, I wrote a series of letters to newspapers on the subject and, in the process, provoked the ire of Robert McCartney QC, one of the most vociferous advocates of selection and a superb propagandist. While getting under his skin felt like something of a success, it had little impact on the debate. Some time after that it seemed as if the matter had been settled at Westminster and that selection had, finally, been ended. Instead, the St Andrews Agreement picked off the

newly formed scab and re-opened a wound which has continued ever since to fester without an acceptable solution in sight.

This book has therefore been written in the hope that the arguments it presents might have some influence on any readers who continue to support selection, but have minds not entirely closed to argument. I would also hope that those readers who are already opposed to selection would find here some reinforcement of their views and some additional arguments to support them.

The Introduction of Selection

Prior to World War II compulsory education in the UK ended at age 14. Provision was by a mix of National Schools, in which some children completed all of their education up to that age; grammar schools, entry to which depended for some pupils (but not all) on results of tests; and independent schools who catered for quite a small proportion of pupils whose parents could afford to pay the fees. During the latter part of the war the government began to look forward to the society that would emerge from the conflict. One of the areas where change was needed, they decided, was education.

Churchill's government from 1940 to 1945 was a National Government and included Ministers drawn from all three main parties. The Deputy Prime Minister was Clement Attlee, leader of the Labour Party. Churchill was almost entirely focused on fighting the war, therefore government of the country, in economic and social matters, was largely left to Attlee. The Minister of Education was RAB Butler, a Conservative, and it was he who brought forward the 1944 Education Bill. It proposed that the school leaving age be raised to 15 and that all pupils at age 11 should have the opportunity of transferring to a grammar school, to a technical school or to a secondary modern school. The last was a new term that was invented in the Bill to describe a school that was neither a grammar school nor a technical school but had no distinguishing characteristics of its own.

Essentially what emerged as the Bill was passed and became the Education Act was the first attempt in the UK to provide universal post-primary education, but to do so in a way that reflected the social stratification of society as it was in the first half of the twentieth century. Grammar schools would educate the professional classes, technical schools those with trade skills and secondary moderns the great mass of unskilled workers. The Bill was passed with the backing of the

government as a whole including members from across the different parties. One of the reasons why there was this level of support among people of different political persuasions was that educational theory at the time was much taken by the potential of IQ Tests to act as predictors of future performance, a potential that has since been shown to be an illusion. IQ Tests, it was thought, would help to guide decisions as to which of the three modes of education a child was suited, so that every child would receive the type of education that was best for them.

In Northern Ireland education was a matter for the government at Stormont. In this, as in many other changes also introduced in the 1940s, Stormont followed Westminster with only minor variations. It is interesting to note that the passage of the Act that created the selective system in Northern Ireland was actually opposed by the grammar schools. The Governing Bodies Association (GBA) which represented them wanted their members to have more say over admissions so that they could continue to admit fee paying pupils. The GBA was resistant to an admissions system entirely based on merit in an academic selection process. The outcome of the negotiations was that two types of grammar schools emerged, one of which had more discretion to admit fee-payers (and so received lower government funding) than the other.

So it was that, in 1948, the first selection process took place, under the title of the Grammar School Qualifying Examination, although there was no provision of technical schools for 11-year-olds and the first secondary intermediate schools (as secondary moderns were called in Northern Ireland) were only in the process of being built. Quite a few of the old National Schools had to make do and cater for the primary stage and pupils up to 15-year-olds right through to the end of the 1950s. The first examinations consisted of two English papers and one in Arithmetic with, in addition, two so-called Intelligence Tests. The Intelligence Tests were taken a month apart, but the other three papers were all taken on the same day – English Paper 1 and Arithmetic in the morning and English Paper 2 in the afternoon.

It is fair to say that a lot of care was taken in assembling the selection mechanism and an Advisory Committee, set up by the Minister for the purpose, published very detailed reports on the outcomes of the 1949 examinations. In the report on the 1949 Qualifying Examination, published in 1951, the Committee was quite positive about the examination itself and the outcomes, although the reliability of the marking of the English component was proving problematic. Where they had a real concern was in the effect that the exam was having on the curriculum in the upper part of primary schools. There were already reports of schools forsaking any attempt to follow a balanced curriculum and concentrating instead on practise for the English and Arithmetic exams and for the IQ tests that accompanied them. This is what the Committee had to say:

We are convinced, therefore, that the only remedies [for ‘cramming’] are indirect ones ... the speeding up, as a matter of extreme urgency, of the provision of intermediate schools. We believe that, with this last requirement satisfied, ‘cramming’ will cease to be the serious problem that it now is; if however, it should continue even when sufficient intermediate schools have been provided, then the whole question of selection will have to be re-examined. Children of ten and eleven must not be deprived of the happiness and freedom, the active enlargement and enrichment of experience which is their right, and nothing which infringes this right can be condoned. At all times the influence of selection methods on the work of the primary school must be most carefully watched.

Selection of Pupils Secondary Schools: A Report of the Advisory Council for Education in Northern Ireland. HMSO (1951)

It was clear that the Committee was convinced that the new intermediate schools would be of equal status to grammar schools and so be equally attractive to parents. Pressure to succeed in the tests would, therefore, diminish and with it the dreadful distortion of the primary curriculum that was already apparent. The optimism of the Committee