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Excellence or Mediocrity?
The future of second level
education in Northern
Ireland

Arthur Green

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If this was a simple choice there would be a brief discussion, excellence would be preferred, and the seminar would close before it began. Excellence means different things to different people. Since the nineteen sixties comprehensive schools in Great Britain have been presented as excellent because they are community enterprises, social laboratories, bases for establishing human equality. Perfect equality is believed to require identical schools.

That dream is defeated by actual human diversity. Diversity respects people as they are. It sees different creeds, different capacities, different preferences. It advocates no single school path. Diversity was glorified by Edmund Burke. Enforced equality descends from Robespierre. Most of us in practice side with Burke.

These two great contraries are embedded in today's debates. Frank Dobson recently attacked New Labour policies on educational issues. He hardly needed to argue his case. It was enough to say that New Labour was 'elitist', and was therefore betraying the Party's *raison d'etre*.

Within New Labour Dobson stands for Robespierre, where Blair stands for Burke. Burke says we are in a 'post-comprehensive' world and his spokesman speaks of 'bog standard comprehensives'. Burke favours specialist schools to foster particular aptitudes. Burke sees a pragmatic case for making A levels distinguish high ability better, or for helping our top universities to remain remarkable, if necessary by differentiated top up fees. Blair in person, like other New Labour figures, has joined the fifteen percent of London parents who reject their local comprehensive school. Such decisions inflame Old Labour, but Burke says parents will naturally do what is best for their children.

Discussion about the Burns Review and the future of our secondary schools takes place in the same world as the New Labour/Old Labour debates. It is nearly forty years since the Plowden Report and Michael Young's attack on meritocracy, but the Burns review uses the language of the nineteen sixties. Liberals grew up to think comprehensives were progressive, and they use egalitarian formulas without noticing that the live issues are now different. They should assess the Northern Ireland system more coolly. More of them will then conclude that the present Transfer Test should be ended, since it has inherent weaknesses and abolition is what most people want, but also that Northern Ireland should keep the advantages of differentiated schools, since that is also what most people want, and they achieve remarkable educational success.

Some statistics are necessary. At the end of Key Stage 2, that is around the age of transfer to secondary schools, about seventy per cent of our Primary School children



have reached Level 4 or above in English, and about seventy five per cent in Mathematics. This may be slightly better than levels in England and Wales. However, put the other way round the figures tell us that twenty five to thirty per cent of primary school leavers are not fully qualified for secondary education. These children go to secondary schools, and form perhaps forty per cent of their pupils. They are helped to improve, and by GCSE level the overall picture is quite creditable.

Success levels in the Transfer Test vary too much from place to place but today average thirty five per cent overall.

There are a number of grammar schools where not only A and B transfer grades, but also C1, C2, and even D grades are admitted. Such schools are moving towards being de facto comprehensives. This trend will probably go much further.

Attainment levels are only the bare bones of what makes education valuable. But because they are measurable they are an objective way to compare systems across the U.K. Such comparisons do not affect the good grounds that exist for criticising UK public education overall - that is another subject. Unlike the rest of the United Kingdom, and for reasons both good and bad, Northern Ireland has a public system that does cater more or less appropriately for different types of ability. There are 72 grammar schools with 62,000 pupils and 166 secondary schools with 93,000 pupils, and so about forty per cent of pupils are in grammar schools and sixty per cent in secondary schools. The usual measure of basic success is 5 GCSE passes at A+ - C level. In Northern Ireland about fifty eight per cent of pupils attain this. In England and Wales the national average is forty seven per cent, or very substantially lower.

In the past it was argued that Northern Ireland's high percentages, particularly in grammar schools, were paid for by an unacceptable level of low relative achievement. That is no longer such a serious argument. From figures quoted publicly by Martin McGuinness it appears that the unfavourable differential between England and Northern Ireland at the bottom end is about two per cent - 86 compared with 88 per cent - and therefore marginal. There are examples of very low school achievement throughout the United Kingdom.

Another confirmation that the Northern Ireland system does not have a uniquely unacceptable tail is that the percentage for zero graded GCSEs is 3.6 per cent in Northern Ireland, well below the 5.6 per cent in England and the 7.7 per cent in Wales. On the other hand, and reaching a uniquely high general level in British public sector education, the grammar school rate of GCSE success here is far above the secondary school rate.



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Entrance rates to university are very high in Northern Ireland, and there are particularly high rates of working class entry. In each of a series of working class categories Northern Ireland has been shown to have much higher entrance rates than any other UK region. That raises other debateable issues, but not for today.

The school system itself is as diverse as Northern Ireland society. There is a dual system in church terms as well as a dual system in selective education terms. There are schools which are large, small, mixed or single sex. There are some which are comprehensive; other refinements come in with the comprehensive integrated or Irish language schools.

This sort of diversity, and even more, is taken for granted in private education. It is usually not possible for the State. In this the Northern Ireland public system contrasts with England, and even with Scotland, where a more or less uniform comprehensive structure was created a generation ago.

It would not be relevant to deal fully with its effects on British education. One small consequence is that it is since comprehensives were introduced there that Northern Ireland's examination results have pulled relatively ahead. When the Burns Review analysed the views of its respondents less than twenty per cent wished Northern Ireland to follow the comprehensive model, and most favoured the status quo or some new selective option.

In Great Britain, the comprehensive ideal, confronted with the actual priorities of parents, has partly faded away. There is the post code selection by which middle class parents choose houses near a good school. Instead of mixed ability teaching there is much class streaming by ability, and class setting by ability. There is the extraordinary new popularity of private day schools. All this amounts to a middle class rebellion against uniformity, indeed against mediocrity. It is what Burke would have expected.

In Northern Ireland we have almost no private secondary education, because our public system broadly reflects the community's wishes. In England and Wales seven per cent of children attend private schools, and twice that level in London. In Scotland, famously home of the democratic intellect, it is even more remarkable that twenty five per cent of Edinburgh's secondary pupils are in private schools, and about fifteen per cent in Glasgow and in Aberdeen. Scottish comprehensives reject streaming, and have hesitations even about setting, which is part of the explanation.

The top UK university institutions are generally agreed to be Oxford and Cambridge, Imperial College, the London School of Economics and University College, London. They are all intensely meritocratic. Today fifty per cent of their entrants come from



private schools. Yet in the nineteen sixties state grammar schools provided about two thirds of the entry to Oxford and Cambridge. The decline in qualified state school entrants is embarrassing both to the universities and to government, but it reflects the comprehensive system's academic weaknesses.

The cost of a private day school education is at least £6000 a year. Few people would incur so much without very good cause, and without access to liberal re-mortgaging. In Northern Ireland the issue hardly arises. Most Northern Ireland voluntary grammar schools charge a standard capitation fee and invite what in practise are modest voluntary contributions. The most successful schools in the Dublin area are nearly all private, and according to Burns the system in general there is very socially selective. Northern Ireland parents are more fortunate.

Burns, however, criticised the Northern Ireland system from a strictly egalitarian mindset. He proposed to destroy the grammar schools, erode the dual community system, and diminish single sex education; and also to make A levels less academic and more vocational, in the spirit so brilliantly demolished by Alison Wolf. Instead there would be a structure of cheap comprehensive schools using mixed ability teaching. Jacobinism would replace diversity.

This may not sound like the benign Burns of the unreadable Burns report. The Cadogan Group pamphlet deconstructed their proposals in greater detail, but the key point is that Burns deliberately removes any basis on which grammar schools could measure the suitability of prospective pupils, and then groups large numbers of schools for organisational purposes. These groupings are the famous Collegiates, which would require a constant round of interschool travel and teaching. Taken together these proposals mean that after a few years all schools in each Collegiate would coagulate. For Burns an individual school ethos, transmitted over a five or seven year school career, is just a phrase, while the education Burns advocates, the numeracy, oracy, literacy and ICT skills, is little more than a good primary education.

The review is often written in childish terms. The authors believes social possibilities are now infinite. They think their proposals will raise Northern Ireland's GDP to average UK levels. They see no reason why any school should feel threatened by their proposals. They believe they can - and should - substitute a culture of co-operation for a culture of competition. They include interesting material about systems in other places, but about England, the key comparator, they are silent. A curiosity of the Review is that it would take a careful reader to be sure they understand that our system is seriously divided between non-denominational and Catholic schools.



Their principal victims are the grammar schools. Burns treated them as exam factories, and in the course of extensive school visits only went to Grosvenor High and St Michaels, Lurgan. This was unforgivable. It is generally agreed that the grammar schools have a clearer mission than other types of schools, but critics of the system think it is a greater good that their pupils should be sacrificed to improve the academic standards of other schools. Burns should have spelt out this argument fully, and included a discussion of the broader strengths of the grammar schools.

Burns appears to favour mixed ability teaching, something which our secondary schools do not normally do, and which most parents and teachers regard as unfair to children of every type. This position is not stated outright. However Burns rejects large comprehensive schools because they would be expensive, and would entail much closure of rural schools, but also because they often practise rigid streaming and therefore do not achieve enough equality. For Burns enforced equality is the dream, and it will be achieved on the cheap.

The Review had its comeuppance from the public consultations which followed. The core of Burns was the proposed Collegiate structure, and that was generally rubbished. Major opposition came from the Catholic Church, which rightly saw the Collegiate system as a threat to the ethos of their schools. Most respondents did favour an end to the present Transfer Test, as Burns had proposed. However two thirds of the public - and there were 200,000 respondents - supported selection, and so did over two thirds of the 20,000 teachers who responded, which was a really remarkable rebuff to Burns. The big union battalions generally supported a comprehensive school solution, and so did Sinn Fein and (de facto) the SDLP, and the Alliance Party. Both the UUP and the DUP did not. There is therefore the basis for an unwelcome community conflict. Those who value much of the present system will take comfort from the caution of the Catholic bishops.

The situation could still be resolved constructively. It is worth pressing the supporters of comprehensive schools to consider precisely what it is they have in mind. For a start we may assume that neither the churches nor the parties are proposing a fully integrated structure, educating both communities together. The system will not be comprehensive in that basic sense. Nor will the Catholic church, which controls few mixed secondary schools, be likely to propose a fully mixed Catholic school structure. That will erode the comprehensive principle further. Nor, we may suppose, will mixed ability teaching become the norm, although that is a traditional comprehensive ideal. Nor is there likely to be bussing between middle class and working class districts, nor between rural and urban areas, to overcome class differences. Nor, almost certainly, will there be the wholesale closure of small



schools, and the construction of many new large schools, which would be necessary to offer a full range of facilities on single premises. If these plausible assumptions are well founded the original social and educational aims of the comprehensive school are not on offer. All that will have happened is that the grammar schools, the part of the system which everyone agrees works effectively, will have been destroyed, and the education of the forty per cent of our secondary pupils who attend them will have been damaged. There will be no measurable gain to compensate for this irreplaceable loss. In the short term Robespierre will have defeated Burke. In the longer term we might expect the same middle class rebellion as in England and Scotland.

There must be a chance that when rational people look at the facts they will agree that our present system should be developed rather than destroyed. There is wide agreement that the ideal basis for secondary school transfer is the informed choice of parents, rather a single Transfer Test.

We might also agree that our present differentiated schools do meet the community's wishes, and do educate our pupils well in comparative terms. There is a short and middle term problem because more parents want their children to go to grammar school than the schools can take, and parents do not always realise that the secondary option is more suitable.

It is helpful to consider how this problem is dealt with in other differentiated systems. The German solution lies partly in primary school assessments, partly in informed discussions by parents with possible secondary schools, and partly, if mistakes have been made, in later holding back gymnasium pupils from one class to the one below, or even excluding them.

It is not wise to read across directly from one system to another. In Northern Ireland we could consider introducing assessments in Primary 5, 6 & 7. The results would go into pupil profiles, but to avoid pressure on primary teachers, they should be externally set and marked. These profiles should be made available to receiving secondary schools, including grammar schools, because they are an essential basis for informed choice.

After a few years, as the system moved towards full parental choice, it would become possible for parents to insist on a particular type of school, if a place could be found. Choices would be eased because total secondary school enrolments are expected to fall by ten per cent - say 15000 - over the next ten years. It would be feasible for government to ensure that grammar school enrolments remained stable, or even increased, while secondary school enrolments went on falling



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disproportionately, as they do now. In that process general grammar school entry standards would decline, more and more of them would approach a comprehensive mix, but the strongest grammar schools would be unaffected. This would be an evolutionary change which would soften the edges of a differentiated system, but leave its enormous virtues in place.

The Government's announcement that the Transfer Test will be ended after 2003 makes rational change more difficult. There are also good arguments for doubting its legality. At all events a fullscale new transfer system will now be necessary by 2004 because otherwise grammar schools will be flooded with applicants for 2005, and would have to apply their own rough and ready criteria for entrance.

Between now and 2004 there is not time to establish an adequate assessment process in primary schools. Since the Burns proposals have been demolished, and the Consultative process has produced community conflict and shallow arguments about alternatives, the Government will be forced itself to re-invent the wheel. This is very unfortunate. It will be for the Department of Education and the public to convince Ministers that any formula read across from decisions taken in England or Scotland a generation ago would be irresponsible and destructive. Education is an area where Northern Ireland already has what is quite close to being a model system for its circumstances.