

Freedom for universities

One rarely noticed difference between Old Labour and New Labour is that whereas Old Labour scrupulously respected the independence of such once autonomous national institutions as the residential universities of Oxford and Cambridge and the British Museum New Labour does not. This illiberal officiousness began in the first term of office with the Prime Minister warning the British Museum that it could not expect extra funding unless it somehow contrived to attract more non-white visitors. It was followed by the Chancellor of the Exchequer attacking Magdalen College, Oxford for not selecting one particular able young woman. He had no knowledge of and had made no enquiry about the strength of the competition, and the disappointed candidate had no connection with his constituency.

Now, in its second term of office, New Labour is ruling that all British universities should admit more students from socially deprived backgrounds, and is proposing to appoint an Access Regulator to head yet another public sector hierarchy charged with enforcing this new order. The same objective could have been attained without any diminution of the independence of the universities, any reduction in university admission standards, or any increase in the already bloated staff of the D for EE. But what it would have required was willingness in New Labour to recognize and to learn from the mistakes of Old Labour. Here the huge mistake of Old Labour, which New Labour refuses to recognize and from which it therefore cannot and will not learn, was the drive to destroy the grammar schools. These had provided great ladders of opportunity for those who used to be characterized as the offspring of social classes IV and V but are now “students from socially deprived backgrounds”. Instead of admitting this mistake New Labour in its first term actually introduced legislation to enable parents to vote any surviving grammar schools out of existence. It was, presumably, surprised and disappointed to find that the only actual attempt to achieve this destructive result - in Ripon – was defeated.

The comprehensive revolution was launched in 1965 when the then Minister, Anthony Crosland, issued DES Circular 10/65. This Directive required all Local Educational Authorities to prepare their plans to go comprehensive. It had scarcely begun to take effect when Mrs. Shirley Williams, the then junior minister in the same Department of Education and Science, made a most remarkable announcement to a Conference of European Ministers of Education. This was to the effect that at that time over 26 percent of the students in the universities of the United Kingdom and 35 percent of the students in all UK institutions of higher education were of working class origin (i.e. were offspring of members of social classes IV and V). This proportion turned out to be by far the highest in Western Europe. The next highest was in Sweden, at 14 percent. Next after that came Denmark at 10 percent, France at 5.3 percent and - remarkably - Switzerland at 4 percent. All the Ministers at that conference were very much surprised by these figures. They are of course by themselves insufficient to prove that what made the difference was the ladders of opportunity provided by the grammar schools, institutions which apparently had and still have no parallel on the mainland of the European continent. But what was and remains scandalous is the failure of the militants of the comprehensive revolution to offer and defend any alternative explanation while still bigotedly and disingenuously insisting that the purpose of that revolution was the promotion of equality of opportunity. Certainly, as we now know from the testimony of Crosland’s widow, his own private objective was different; presumably something more like equality of outcome.

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