Education, education, education Chapter 12: the comprehensive revolution

A year or so after *Wildcat* folded I decided that since our generation hadn't changed the world – and now looked highly unlikely to – I should try to do something else. So in 1977 I applied for a place on a one-year teacher training course at Garnett College in Roehampton, south-west London, which specialised in further education. I knew there were opportunities in FE colleges which ran courses in journalism and I liked the idea of teaching young people who had some idea about what they wanted to do in life, whereas I didn't much like what I'd found out at firsthand about British state schooling. There was too much of a contrast between schools in London and the ones in Kampala where the boys really wanted to learn – and were charming and polite as well. You could say that my experience at Mengo spoilt me for state secondary school teaching back home.

And another thing. Wearing my anarchist hat – it still fitted – I objected to compulsory state schooling just as most conventional orthodox left-wing people objected to voluntary paid-for schooling. My position by the way is that paying school fees for your children is no more morally reprehensible than paying a food or repair bill or rent for somewhere to live – in a society based on money everything, as they say, has its price. Indeed how can it be "immoral" to pay for schooling up to 18 but morally necessary to pay for it after 18, as self-labelling left-wing people supporting the British state now insist? By what right does the state compel parents to commit their children to its institutions to be brainwashed into the current orthodoxy whether it's anti-gay or pro-gay, anti-abortion or pro-abortion, anti or pro the death penalty, God in his many manifestations, transgenderism, wokeness, British values, flying the flag, above all "free speech", whatever that may mean? And fining parents who take their children out of state school during termtime? How did that become normalised? Then there's the use of that bogus lying acronym ROSLA, the "raising of the school-leaving age", which actually means ROCSA, the raising of the compulsory schooling age.

The Garnett course necessarily involved looking at post-11 education in general including secondary schooling. Some of the work in further education colleges was at secondary level – GCSEs, for example. And the rest of the FE work followed on from what was happening in the schools. In the next chapter I look at the question of English teaching but here the subject is secondary as well as further education, and inevitably you have to include a glance at primary education since that affected what happened later.

So what did I learn at Garnett? I was reminded that being lectured is a passive experience and I learnt from being lectured that lecturing is the rarest of all the teaching skills. I concluded that in routine teaching lectures, where they are considered necessary, should usually be as short as possible and that lecturers should, above all, keep their students awake; they should learn to be lively even if they're not natural performers. Unfortunately I don't remember being given any useful tips on lecturing at Garnett; my favourite bit of the whole course was being informed – in a lecture of course – that lecturing was by no means the best way of communicating important information. This was not learning positively by doing but learning negatively by being done to.

By contrast methods based on seminar/discussion/working groups of 12 or so with somebody introducing a topic having done some preparation were both stimulating and effective. This model transferred easily to practical, skills-based work on journalism techniques like interviewing, news and feature writing and subbing copy. On teaching practice, a key part of the course, I learnt a lot by watching journalism lecturers in my first week. The more confident ones involved me in the sessions immediately.

At the same time as I went to Garnett I was about to become a father so the question "What is to be done about children's schooling?" was beginning to be personal and direct rather than a topic for speculation and debate. Until now all the decisions about my two step-daughters' schooling had been taken by my wife, who was herself a primary teacher, with nil input from their father who lived abroad.

Amanda herself had had an unusual schooling history for a middle-class child (she and her family were certainly "middle-class", although some of them perversely tried to deny it). Her left-wing journalist father had been a boarder at Tonbridge, the Kent public school; her mother, who'd been to grammar school and then spent some time in Paris learning French, was a nurse; but they were both bohemians and delighted in flouting convention. Moved about constantly as she was growing up, Amanda lived in various houses in Suffolk and Sussex, and on a sea-going yacht anchored off the south coast for two years, and went to half a dozen different state primary schools. She failed the 11+ exam so was home-schooled for a year by her mother, whose lessons tended to be literary and imaginative rather than scientific and logical. Back in London, staying with relatives, she did her O levels at the West Kensington central school, then transferred to Holland Park comprehensive in 1958, the year the school opened.

She went straight into the sixth form, where after two years she passed her A levels in English literature, economic history and geography, wrote an essay that won her an exchange scholarship to the USA for a year's schooling, and gained a place at Sussex university to study American literature. She enjoyed being a pioneer at Holland Park where she was treated in the classroom as an equal with the boys; she captained the girls' hockey team, was a prefect and at the same time wore her CND badge with pride – and with no comeback from the teachers most of whom were either lefties or at least liberals: in all, a pretty *comprehensive* success, you might say, for an 11+ failure: just what the new system was supposed to make possible.

The Holland Park sixth form then was based in historic Holland House where the common room overlooked a walled garden; the teachers wore academic gowns and took learning, as well as the passing of exams, seriously; small groups of six to eight for the A-level subjects replaced classes of 30, common elsewhere in state education, above all in primary schools; teaching took place in wood-panelled rooms equipped with tables and chairs rather than in bleak classrooms with decrepit ink-stained desks; there was an excellent, well-stocked library...sounds idyllic, doesn't it? More like a posh private school than a typical state secondary of the 1950s.

Not surprisingly, when the time came in the 1970s, Amanda thought that her daughters should be schooled in the state system, proceeding from a local primary – by now she was teaching in one – to a comprehensive. Pimlico when it opened in 1970 was new, inspiring and trend-setting just as Holland Park had been; it was co-educational, which was important, and socially diverse; the classes were modishly mixed-ability rather than streamed as in the olden days. As well as offering a wide

range of academic subjects Pimlico was strong on the art and music side (one of our girls had a strong visual sense, the other had started playing the harp at primary school). And it was housed in a brand-new purpose-built concrete structure designed by a distinguished and celebrated architect.

There is a positive family aspect to all this which is very much part of the story. While Pimlico was being built, the children's grandfather and I often passed it on our way to the Dolphin Square squash courts and we speculated about the possibility of them going to this exciting new school when they were old enough. The head teacher, Kathleen Mitchell, was the mother of a friend of ours who lived next-door-but-one to us in Clapham. Later, Amanda's cousin started her teaching career at Pimlico and another member of the extended family turned out to be the modern languages inspector responsible for the school. Ironically, all this privileged access was in some ways a disadvantage: when problems cropped up, Amanda was reluctant to make a fuss. As a teacher herself she didn't want to be seen as the dreaded "complaining parent", somebody who put her own children before the general interest. And naturally I took my cue from her.

But on one family social occasion I did ask the modern languages inspector what the school's policy on teaching French was supposed to be. The girls' grandmother had retired to France and we made regular family visits so they were used to the idea of saying *bonjour, monsieur* or *merci, madame* where appropriate. But Pimlico's French lessons didn't seem to go much beyond that: when would actual French teaching start? In reply the inspector accepted that what was happening was far from ideal: most of the children were both out of control and resistant to learning French and would therefore drop it as soon as they could; that would give the motivated ones the opportunity to learn the language properly. In the meantime there was nothing to be done. This was a private acknowledgement that the celebrated all-in approach – the basis of comprehensive schooling – wasn't actually working at Pimlico.

And as it turned out, there were plenty of problems at the school. The first and most obvious was the building itself: it was lauded in the educational and architectural press and won awards but it was seen by many of its users, both teaching staff and pupils, as essentially impractical. For example, here's a letter published in the *Architects' Journal* from one of the original 1970 pupils who went on to a career in engineering: "The layout of the building can be extremely difficult to understand, even after attending there for three years. When you can only access certain parts of the building from certain staircases, or have to go outside to get to some classrooms, one can only wonder at the reasoning of the architect behind the layout. It is only now, after spending the 26 years since I left in consulting, civil and structural engineering, that I fully appreciate some of the design flaws the building has."*

*Letter by Bob Lye, 14 September, 1999

Now here's a teacher's comment: "Those of us who taught there were not impressed by the awards won by the building. Its extensive windows resulted in very high summer temperatures. In the long hot summer of 1976 I was then the NUT rep and I had to press the health and safety executive to visit and try to persuade senior management to ameliorate the problem of temperatures of over 35 degrees."** The writer adds that the building had another basic design fault – the central concourse: "At lesson change nearly 2,000 students converged on one concourse with predicable consequences on behaviour."

**Letter by Ian Wilson to the *Guardian*, 17 January, 2019

This raises a key point, I think: the sheer size of the urban comprehensive was/is a huge disadvantage, daunting for both 11-year-old newbie pupils and inexperienced, nervous teachers. References to large numbers of uncontrollable students and frequent outbreaks of rowdy behaviour recur constantly in reports about urban comprehensives, including Pimlico in the 40 years of its existence (it closed in 2010). Pimlico was notorious for conflict between children from different social backgrounds as well as routine violence and vandalism: the middle-class children – a sizeable minority – were ridiculed as “melons” because some of them bought their lunch at a trendy local food shop that sold exotic fruit. Our daughters reported frequent verbal abuse, taunting and bullying, mainly by other girls rather than boys. Homework was snatched and torn up or thrown down the toilet. Lessons were constantly disrupted, above all if the teacher was new, inexperienced or seen to be vulnerable. The favourite game with a new teacher was to see how many minutes it would take to make her – more often than not it was a “her” – burst into tears.

So far this is not exceptional in accounts of inner-city comprehensives during the 1970s but what follows certainly is. At the age of 14 our elder daughter was one of the witnesses to a fatal stabbing just outside the school. The boy responsible was an ex-pupil whose sister was in her class. Another pupil witness was Becky Gardiner who went on to work for the *Guardian* and wrote later about the killing and the trial that followed:

“After the stabbing, the boy with the knife had threatened the crowd: ‘Say anything and you’ll get the same.’ I believed him. I would have done anything to avoid giving evidence, but another boy made me stay...In the months I spent waiting for [the] trial to start I saw the killer’s sister every single day. How could I avoid her, she was in my year at school. We’d pass in the corridor. She’d look me in the eye. I’d look quickly to the floor. I was a grass. She was going to kill me...”*

**Guardian*, 7 February, 2002

If anything our daughter had it even worse than Becky since the killer’s sister was in her class and had always been one of the class bullies. Now after the killing the intimidation was worse: she was frightened to go back to school. Amanda went to see Kath Mitchell, the head, taking our daughter with her. When she said it was routine for some Pimlico boys to carry knives, Kath was quite put out: she didn’t seem aware of what was going on. (The boy was convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to three years in prison.)

To her credit our daughter decided to tough it out and stay at Pimlico, rather than transfer to another school, though several of her schoolmates (among them Ben Plowden, her ladyship’s grandson) left to go elsewhere. She passed her exams and went on to train as a nurse; then moved into midwifery and became a senior research fellow in Australia.

Indeed there are plenty of ex-Pimlico pupils who have succeeded, you might say – and some have written about their experiences. But the accounts aren’t exactly complimentary with violent behaviour and chaotic “mixed-ability” classes the main complaints. Zoe Brennan, who arrived at Pimlico in 1983, described* “the pupils wrestling on the unpoliced concourse to the jubilant chorus of ‘Fight, fight, fight’, the regular setting fire to bins” and “mixed-ability classes in a permanent atmosphere of chaos”. For her the critical point came when she told the careers adviser she wanted

to be a journalist – "And I want to go to Oxford." "Have you thought of a secretarial course?" was the reply. Then she was refused a reference for Oxford because "no one from here gets in there". Zoe got the message and left Pimlico for sixth form college, Oxford and a successful career as a newspaper journalist.

*"Why state schools should stream their pupils", *Daily Telegraph*, 30 January 2016

Our daughter finished the course but some years down the line there was no chance that anyone else in the family would be made to follow in her footsteps. Fortunately we could afford to pay for my son to go to a fee-paying secondary school. This wasn't an aberration on our part, more an example of a general response to a dire situation in our part of London – for people who could afford it.

For example, when I went to discuss my son's secondary schooling with the woman who was acting head of his Clapham primary school, I explained our decision – and her words were unambiguous and emphatic. "I'm relieved to hear what you've said," she told me. "There is no local state secondary school for boys that I could really recommend at the moment – one or two for girls perhaps but none for boys." What advice she had for parents who couldn't afford private education for their sons I can't say.

Another example: one of my wife's teacher colleagues at her Brixton primary school had reached with her husband the same view as we had: whereas teaching in the state sector was socially useful as well as challenging and interesting it didn't compel you to inflict it on your children if it wasn't good enough. Their son, like ours, would go to a fee-paying school. Again, like ours, he would have his private school fees partly paid from the money earned by a state school teacher.

And finally: on the day when I escorted my 11-year-old son to his fee-paying secondary school to start the first term I met two other *Guardian*–reading fathers who were doing precisely the same thing, the radical playwright Snoo Wilson and the designer of *Private Eye* magazine, Tony Rushton. With regret we agreed that this was not what was supposed to happen: the progressive Sixties hadn't really delivered, had they?

But what was the rationale for the "comprehensive revolution" that was supposed to make such a difference to British schooling and society? I first heard this phrase in the autumn of 1960. The left-wing educationist Tyrell Burgess used it when he addressed the Oxford Labour club, arguing passionately and persuasively that the comprehensive school was much more than a socially just alternative to the existing "tripartite" secondary system introduced in 1944, consisting of grammar, technical and modern schools, with the academically oriented grammars remaining on top. The comprehensive school, Burgess said, was an educational-cum-social innovation that would set in motion a massive change in society. Having been schooled together in an egalitarian system, future generations would insist on equality at work and in life generally; they would break down the class barriers that deformed British society. In that sense the comprehensive was certainly seen as revolutionary by its most vocal advocates.

I don't remember much dissent at that Labour club meeting. Whether we'd come to Oxford from public schools or grammar schools, boys' schools or girls' schools or the odd co-ed and/or early comprehensive, whether we were on the left or the right-wing of the Labour party, we all opposed

privilege and hierarchy in education and naturally supported the idea of comprehensives. And of course at the same time we were against the fee-paying “public schools” – particularly if we’d been to one. But I don’t think that most of us, unless we planned to become schoolteachers, gave much thought to the practicalities of the matter.

On the left of the Labour party, as opposed to the Fabians and Gaitskellites* on the right, most of us hadn’t bothered to “read Crosland” – I certainly hadn’t. Anthony Crosland’s book *The Future of Socialism*, published in 1956, was the manifesto that was said to have changed British politics, inspiring several generations of right-wing Labour politicians; it was certainly a long-term influence on Tony Blair’s “New Labour” project. A 50th anniversary edition published in 2006 by Constable in association with the Fabian Society has a foreword by Gordon Brown stressing the continuing relevance of Crosland’s book to progressive politics including education. “Instead of, as we did in the past, investing only in some of the potential of some of our children, we must invest in all the potential of all children,” Brown wrote.

*Members of the gradualist Fabian Society and supporters of Hugh Gaitskell, Labour party leader, 1955-63

And it was Crosland – well-known for that quote recorded by his wife Susan in her biography**, “If it’s the last thing I do, I’m going to destroy every fucking grammar school in England. And Wales. And Northern Ireland.” – who was the Labour minister responsible for implementing the policy of comprehensivisation in 1965.

***Tony Crosland*, Susan Crosland, Jonathan Cape, 1982

So to understand and assess the original argument for comprehensives it’s not a bad idea to go back to Crosland’s celebrated book. In his chapter on education he reviews the existing state school system based on selection at 11 calling it “the most divisive, unjust, and wasteful of all the aspects of social inequality”; the 1944 Education Act hadn’t achieved “equality of opportunity” for all sorts of reasons. Crosland also stresses the need to reduce class sizes, improve school buildings and raise the school-leaving age. And then he comes to the nub of the question: even when all these improvements have been made, he says, there will be no “equality of opportunity” while “we maintain a system of superior private schools, open to the wealthier classes, but out of reach of poorer children however talented and deserving”. So the first and most important reform must be to grasp the nettle of the “public schools”.

Later in the chapter he makes some specific policy proposals in a way that is measured and cautious. To be successful, comprehensives need various things like “a quite exceptional calibre of headmaster***, of which the supply is severely limited; a high-quality staff for sixth-form teaching – again a factor in limited supply – and buildings of an adequate scale and scope”. If these conditions can’t be met “it would be quite wrong to close down grammar schools of acknowledged academic quality”.

***an example of sexism common at the time, even among lefties and social reformers: it’s obvious that being able to include an able woman or two would ease the shortage of good “headmasters”.

Then Crosland puts an even stronger argument against the wanton destruction of grammar schools, one that may surprise those who recognise him only for the “destroy every fucking grammar school”

quote. He says that most education authorities don't favour mass comprehensivisation – "and no one proposes that the remainder should be coerced". (Until he becomes the minister responsible for it Crosland is not keen on coercion.) But the next point really does deserve emphasis: "It would, moreover, be absurd from a socialist point of view to close down the grammar schools, while leaving the public schools still holding their present commanding position."

Crosland has spotted something important here, something that, in office, he obviously forgot or ignored, something that less bright Labour politicians and their cheerleaders have consistently failed to see: closing down the grammar schools "would simply intensify the class cleavage by removing the middle tier which now spans the gulf between top and bottom". Isn't this precisely what has happened in the past 50-odd years? And in office Labour went further than closing down state grammar schools wherever possible: they abolished the direct grant and voluntary-aided systems, forcing schools that had traditionally offered free places to bright working-class children to go comprehensive – or, for parents who could find the money, private.

An option, never seriously considered by Labour educationists and politicians, was to convert grammar schools to sixth-form colleges, restricting entry to pupils who had passed their GCE/GCSEs – something equivalent to the French lycée. The comprehensive would then have become an extension of primary school from 11 to 16, as so many in fact became. But this would have meant a massive increase in funding.

So what is to be done now about the "public schools"? In 1956 Crosland considered what options there were and said there were three, though the second turned out to be: do nothing but hope for the best, namely the withering away of the independent sector because of the excellence of the state sector – which hasn't worked out, clearly. The first option, abolition, Crosland rejected calmly but decisively, making several obvious points: the category "private schools" includes experimental schools* – they are almost always private – and it would be silly as well as wrong to outlaw them since they are a valuable source of new ideas; then, as a matter of principle, "interference with private liberty would be intolerable" (except to the dyed-in-the-wool totalitarian this point is unanswerable); and finally the abolition of fee-paying schools would create a strong demand for private tutors and schools abroad, access to which would also have to be banned. Imagine officials at Dover, instead of just searching incoming vehicles for third world and east European immigrants, having to check outgoing vehicles in order to spot would-be expat school pupils, trying to distinguish them from their affluent peers who are merely going skiing or water-skiing in foreign parts.

*Summerhill, founded by AS Neill in 1921, is a good example.

It's a pretty obvious point this. In fact I've often wondered if the people who say they want to "abolish the public schools" – that is, harass them, punish them and make them illegal – are aware that, from the reign of the Protestant Queen Elizabeth I until the early 19th century, there was no such thing as a legal Catholic school in England. Established once-Catholic schools like Winchester and Eton were compelled to conform to the new state religion, Anglicanism, and newly founded Catholic schools had to operate abroad, which inevitably made them more expensive and socially exclusive but didn't stop them functioning altogether. You could say therefore that "abolition" has already been tried over more than 200 years and has failed since a Catholic public school like Stonyhurst (founded at St Omer in northern France in 1593) survived its centuries of exile and continues to flourish.

And of course, if there were to be an end to charitable status for fee-paying schools, or punitive taxation or other state interference short of abolition, the private sector might be weakened, though it would certainly survive – but school fees would have to go up, and then increased fees would ensure that the sector would become even more exclusive than ever. Which takes us back to Crosland's original argument: surely it isn't desirable to "intensify the class cleavage"?

His third policy option was the integration of the fee-paying schools into the state system. He called this the "most sensible approach", quoting the recommendation of the Fleming Committee in 1944 that independent schools should offer a quarter of their places to non fee-paying pupils; the proportion would gradually increase until these schools became "equally accessible to all pupils". Crosland's conclusion in the 1950s when he published his book was emphatic: "The next Labour government must simply choose between sending no state-aided pupils to the public schools at all, which would be a public confession that it had lost interest in socialism and equality, and sending a really large number. Clearly it must do the latter..."

As it turned out, Harold Wilson's 1964 government didn't do the latter (so according to the Crosland argument Labour stood accused of having "lost interest in socialism and equality"). But it was certainly set on reform, particularly in education where "progressive" ideas dominated. In 1964 the process of raising the school leaving age (ROSLA) from 15 to 16 was planned, though it didn't actually happen until 1972. In 1965 Crosland, now education minister, issued the historic Circular 10/65 instructing local authorities to make plans for the introduction of comprehensive schools. Then in 1966 there was the three-week Dartmouth Seminar on the teaching of English when British and American specialists met and decided the subject should become "an instrument of personal growth"*. And finally in 1967 the influential Plowden committee published its famous report, describing and endorsing child-centred primary education.

*see Chapter 12

In fact Plowden made a number of other proposals, some of which were adopted over time and some of which were ignored. For example, the report said yes to nursery education from the age of three and to a restructuring of primary education with transfers at eight and 12, instead of 11; yes to a reduction in the size of primary school classes and to more male teachers; and an emphatic no to tests of intelligence and attainment, eg the 11+, and corporal punishment.

But the overwhelming effect of Plowden was to accelerate the move to "progressive", child-centred education. Crucially, the abolition of the 11+ encouraged primary schools to continue to develop a more informal approach with an emphasis on individuality and learning by discovery. After all, if there was no longer powerful pressure from parents, teachers and school governors for the pupils to perform to a particular standard so they could pass the 11+ and so win selection to grammar school, primary schools could maintain a more relaxed and child-centred way of working. The report's key slogan was "At the heart of the educational process lies the child." And Plowden herself wrote, two years after the publication of her report: "The effect of the Report has been to accelerate the pace of change – to endorse the revolution in primary education which has been taking place since the war."

In my opinion the three most useful Plowden proposals were to start schooling at the age of three; to restructure it with transfers to the next stage at eight and 12 (though I would have said 13) since

11 is far too young for the biggest change in a pupil's development; and – most important of all – to reduce the size of primary school classes by employing more teachers. This is the nettle that no government has since grasped. Again and again, this recommendation is made by experts, inspectors, committees, unions, individual teachers – and anybody who knows anything about schooling. Again and again, this recommendation is ignored, presumably because successive governments know only too well that the voting public will not pay the price that more egalitarian state education requires.

Class size is one of the key issues that influence parents to go private. Another is the general condition of most of the children in the neighbourhood: are they at five years old ready for school? What's their attitude to learning and being taught? Have they learnt to socialise, co-operate, work together?

Simply, you're better off as an individual pupil if the other children in your class have a positive mind-set and are ready for school. This sounds so obvious it hardly needs saying. In fact it's a point that does need emphasising as schooling has become less "the teacher instructs; the pupils listen and absorb" and more "the pupils ask questions and investigate to find things out for themselves"; less "the pupils take in information as individuals" and more "the pupils collaborate in group learning". The more that learning is active rather than passive the more it depends for success on the motivation of the learners and their attitude to each other. You don't need a degree in psychology to see the point.

When large classes have to be taught according to the ideology of "mixed-ability", teachers and pupils are truly up against it. But there's another thing. For some bizarre reason, which I have never understood, the state primary school seems committed to the practice of the same teacher teaching their class virtually everything on the syllabus for an entire year. So the teacher may need to prepare several different lesson plans, for different ability levels, in each of the subjects on the timetable. And the pupil has to put up with the same teacher all day long. If I may say this politely, some teachers must find aspects of the syllabus more challenging – I think that's the correct PC word – than others; and some pupils must find parts of the school day insupportably tedious.

I hold the old-fashioned view that teachers should know what they are talking about (and they shouldn't talk too much). In my experience it is the able and knowledgeable teacher who is more likely to have the confidence to say in response to a pupil's question: "I'll have to look that up – but why don't you look it up as well and we can compare notes?" The sharper you are as a student the easier it is to spot the teacher who's desperately trying to conceal the fact that they're really not sure how to answer a question because they lack the necessary background knowledge.

This knowledge thing is really the key: if "progressive education" means using new, different, up-to-date *methods* of teaching, concentrating on the basics at the beginning, introducing the nuances and subtleties as the children develop, who could oppose it? Not me, certainly: I'm all in favour of innovation, experiment, exciting ways of finding new solutions to old problems. And the lecture is certainly not the ideal way of teaching children. But unfortunately, all too often, "progressive education" has meant something contradictory to learning itself. It has been based on the absurd idea that acquiring knowledge doesn't matter, that what matters is process, method, skills ("transferable" skills of course) *instead of* knowledge. This is the theme of Daisy Christodoulou's excellent demolition job on the modern orthodoxy, *Seven Myths About Education.** Another

iconoclast is Robert Peal, now acting head of the West London Free School, who records this ridiculous remark made by the deputy head at his first school: "History is a skills-based curriculum. You should really be able to teach it without knowing anything at all."** In the United States ED Hirsch, who describes himself as a political liberal who was forced to become an educational conservative,*** stresses that it is children from disadvantaged homes that suffer most from abandoning the knowledge-based curriculum.

*Routledge, 2014. The seven myths are: facts prevent understanding; teacher-led instruction is passive; the 21st century fundamentally changes everything; you can always just look it up; we should teach transferable skills; projects and activities are the best way to learn; teaching knowledge is indoctrination.

***Progressively Worse: The burden of bad ideas in British schools*, Civitas, 2014

*** *The Making of Americans*, Yale University Press, 2010

Of course there's another big divide: where do you live? In the inner city or the outer suburbs? In the affluent parts of the south-east or the poverty-stricken parts of the north-east? A "good" postcode promises nice neighbours and calm, considerate, competent schooling for your children. There's not the same need to go private if you can afford to buy your way into the leafy suburbs or one of the commuter towns and villages where house prices start at half a million pounds. It adds insult to injury when such affluent people with "progressive" views whose children attend a good primary or comprehensive criticise parents who reluctantly go private because their local state school doesn't deliver.

There's a special *Guardian* reader's tone of disdain directed at these people who break the unwritten rules. Among them the worst offenders are said to be the left-wing politicians who send their children anywhere other than the local primary and comprehensive: ideology dictates that, instead, they should be made to suffer like other people's children. But isn't this the wrong way round: why should the *children* of a politician be discriminated against? Castigate the parent for their policies for other people's children but don't penalise the child unlucky enough to have a politician for a parent.

As a Londoner I was struck speechless once when a work colleague who lived somewhere in Hertfordshire let slip that his son at the local comprehensive was a member of the school golf team. A golf team at a comprehensive? But of course, why not? Why not golf, cricket, the classical languages, drama, music, art, debating and the rest at comprehensive schools? After all, the original argument used to promote the idea of them was "grammar schools for all", a slogan used by Harold Wilson campaigning in the 1964 election. And Crosland's famous Circular 10/65 promised to "preserve all that is valuable in grammar school education for the children who now receive it and make it available for more children".

But nobody could argue that since 1965 the comprehensive schools as a whole have justified the faith in them that the educational revolutionaries had. Of course there have been successes but they have been offset by the failures. Are they fit for purpose? In fact the label "comprehensive" attached to an individual school doesn't tell you very much. What is clear is that most parents in most areas of England and Wales send their children to the local comprehensive so you could say they accept the

current system. However, nobody can say how many of those parents would go private if they could afford it.

Where once Britain had a succession of ex-grammar school prime ministers, starting with Harold Wilson in 1964, we now seem doomed to be ruled by people from fee-paying schools. Most people know that David Cameron and Boris Johnson went to Eton but, just as significantly, the current Labour leader, Sir Keir Starmer, is an old boy of Reigate Grammar School which went independent in 1976 while he was a pupil. And don't let's forget his most successful Labour predecessor, trendy Tony "I'm your mate" Blair, who went to Fettes in Scotland, which has been called the Eton of the north.

From the bench of judges to the England cricket team the powerful, influential and successful people in Britain today are disproportionately the products of independent schools. So abolish them, some say. But as Crosland the thinker (as opposed to Crosland the politician) pointed out, that's not the answer. The sensible answer surely is to improve state schooling.

The closure of schools caused by the Covid pandemic raised all sorts of questions: the need to maintain free school meals, for example; the non-availability in poor homes of personal computers; above all, the facts of life for families living in poverty – cramped, overcrowded, badly heated housing, lack of garden space, lack of spare cash for treats and emergencies, not to mention a higher death rate from the virus caused by greater personal contact at home as well as at work. Meanwhile there have been some absurdities, such as the decision by the Portuguese government to force private schools to close for a while since the state schools had to.

So you might say that the pandemic has removed the last thread of credibility from the specious argument that revolutionising the education system is a short cut to a more equal society. Instead, first establish your equal society; then, logically, you can hope for a more egalitarian approach to education.