

# Britain: Labour promises further privatisation in state education

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Labour has repeated its 1997 pledge that “education, education, education” will continue to be its number one priority should it win the June 7 general election. For working class families this should be seen not as a promise, but a threat.

For the past four years, the restructuring of state education has taken place at breathtaking speed, suffering more government interventions and policy implementations than any other sector. But Labour's education reforms have not reversed chronic under-investment in schools and teacher shortages, but are instead undermining public education through introducing greater selection and privatisation.

Labour's ten-point education plan, *Realising the Talent of All*, outlines an agenda for destroying what remains of the comprehensive education system and can only deepen the social divide in educational attainment. Having concentrated its energies in restructuring primary education in its first term, the next Labour government will focus on secondary education.

Its main proposals are to:

- \* Increase the number of “specialist schools” to 1,500 by the year 2006, almost one in every two. These will focus on the teaching of technology, modern languages, arts and science. Engineering and business studies have recently been added to the list. Ten percent of the intake would be selected on ability.

- \* The expansion of religious schools by a further 100. Religious schools have an obligation to raise just 15 percent of their capital investment—primarily for buildings and infrastructure. This will be reduced to 10 percent as a further incentive.

- \* Delegating greater autonomy to head teachers of successful schools regarding finance.

One of the most significant aspects of Labour's manifesto is the extension of private sector involvement in the running of state education.

Labour plans to introduce an education white paper shortly after beginning its second term, enabling private contractors to run schools and key services. Previously under Labour, the private sector could only be brought in when a school or Local Education Authority were deemed to be “failing.” According to School Standards Minister Estelle Morris, who is tipped to take over as the next Education Secretary, “What we want to do is to amend the legislation so that if you are good, you can use the private sector willingly.”

The current Education Secretary David Blunkett said, “Labour will set no targets or limits for the involvement of the private sector.” Within days of making the remarks, Surrey County Council announced it was handing over its management responsibilities for Abbeylands Comprehensive School to Nord Anglia, a private education company, which was awarded a seven-year contract to take over the school. It is to be renamed the Runnymede Business and Enterprise College and granted specialist school status. The company will get huge bonuses if it improves academic results.

Coupled with efforts to encourage the private sector, Labour is strengthening existing measures to abolish the limited powers of the Local

Education Authorities, which were traditionally responsible for running education services within counties and city boroughs. Up until 1998, the LEAs had almost exclusive power over both funding and education provision for all children and schools under their jurisdiction. The introduction of Local Management of Schools (LMS) under the previous Conservative government devolved funding directly to the schools. Schools now have had to “buy in” the services they require, including staff, education materials and building maintenance, either from the LEA or the private sector.

This has produced a high level of competition between schools, since they are now funded according to the number of children on their rolls. Those in predominately poorer working class neighbourhoods struggle to get students and can often face closure.

Labour have now set targets for the LEAs in England to delegate 85 percent of their education budgets to schools by 2001-2 and 90 percent by 2003-4, and are prepared to introduce legal requirements if the LEAs do not comply. Currently, schools control 82 percent of their budget, compared with less than five percent a decade ago.

Whilst private companies have been working in the state education sector for many years, their role was initially limited to providing school equipment and books. They now supply school transport, financial services, school meals, teacher training, curriculum advice, supply teachers, grounds and building maintenance. In 1998, the School Standards Framework Act allowed the government to remove a failing LEA, and hand over the management and control of all the schools under its jurisdiction to the private sector.

A Select Committee on Education and Employment report into “The role of private sector organisations in public education”, held last June, revealed that in the space of one year, 11 Consultancy firms and 16 service providers have been awarded framework contracts by the government. The contracts last between 5-7 years, after which the LEA can either renew them, or hire a new contractor, or resume control itself if it can convince the Department of Education that it is capable of doing so. The extended contracts handed over to the private sector will inevitably lead to de-skilling within the LEA, and many will be deemed incapable of providing education services, thus private provision will become the norm. The government aims to have all 150 LEAs inspected by the end of 2001. Of the 75 inspected so far, 15 have been taken over by the private sector.

“Edu-business” is now one of the fastest growing sectors on the London stock exchange, with returns of 30 percent per annum. The growth in this area started in the early nineties, following the introduction of Local Management of Schools. In the last few years, companies such as Nord Anglia have been lobbying to be allowed greater access and control over the running of schools, something Labour then granted in 1999 under the “fair funding” initiatives. These businesses have an entirely parasitic relationship to the public sector. Their staff are recruited primarily from the state sector—LEA inspectors, head teachers and teachers alike—having

been trained at public expense.

The “business friendly” measures implemented by Labour have radically transformed the function of the state education sector. Instead of funding education provision, the government financially underwrites the corporate interests of edu-business, with the taxes paid by ordinary working people being used to guarantee their profits. Unlike state-run schools and local authorities, which face closure or being taken over if they exceed their budgets, the government protects the education companies against bankruptcy. Already enjoying the lowest corporate tax rates in Europe, private enterprise is now profiteering from what was formerly provided by the public sector.

The domination of the profit motive can only end in the destruction of public education. In launching Labour's new manifesto, Blair claimed that he was attempting to redress educational inequality. But Blair's official spokesman, Alistair Campbell, has said the existing problems of the education system were a result of previous endeavours to create “bog standard” comprehensive schools. The call for education to be provided equally for all, and that such a comprehensive system can actually contribute towards eliminating social distinctions, is now routinely dismissed as utopian egalitarianism.

Labour's attack on the comprehensive system epitomises its abandonment of any commitment to social reforms. It has long been known that a child's social background is the greatest determinant of its educational attainment. This was enshrined in the three-tier school system that came about through the Reform Act of 1944. The very rich sent their children to fee-paying private schools, usually followed by an undergraduate course at Oxford or Cambridge. The children of the upper middle classes and a smaller number of educationally gifted children from more humble social origins that passed the “11 plus” examination were usually sent to selective Grammar schools, where the emphasis was on academic achievement and gaining a university place. Those children largely from working class families who failed the selection test went to Secondary Moderns, which concentrated on “vocational” courses. The introduction of the comprehensive system was meant to ameliorate such sharp social distinctions by establishing schools that taught a common curriculum to classes of mixed ability, in order to raise the educational attainment of all children irrespective of their social background.

In many ways, it was a bold initiative. Between 1953 and 1972, with the introduction of comprehensive schools, total expenditure on public services increased by 82.9 percent and in education by nearly 243 percent. The school leaving age was raised from 14 to 16 in 1974. Progressive and “child centred” education theories, dedicated to broadening children's intellectual and emotional horizons won wider support. Tuition in foreign languages, music, dance, and sports were offered to many working class children for the first time. The injection of increased public funds into education, the lessening of selection and the delivery of a broader curriculum resulted in illiteracy dropping by one million in a decade.

The comprehensive project was never completed, however. Always opposed by sections of the ruling class, whose money ensured the survival of the private education sector, it remained under funded and only partially implemented. Moreover, with the best will in the world, egalitarian schooling could not by itself compensate for and overcome the fundamental social distinctions within society.

The 1980s saw the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher begin the destruction of the comprehensive system. The new millennium is now witnessing Labour's efforts to deliver the *coup de grace*. Instead of ensuring greater equality, Labour advocates the principle of “meritocracy” that is supposed to reflect the natural order of things. Its mission is to remodel the state education sector to actively promote academic differentiation at every level, thus deepening the social distinctions already manifest in the continued existence of private education for the children of the rich.

sense of urgency comes from the imperative for public education to prove that it can respond to the challenges of the new economy. The danger is that as the most prosperous parts of our society grow, more parents with increasing income at their disposal will turn to private education, particularly at secondary level. If this were to occur on a large scale, growing numbers of people would become less willing to pay taxes to fund public education which would then decline in quality and provide only for the disadvantaged. It is hard to imagine under those circumstances how social cohesion could be achieved and how the transmission of ever growing inequality from one generation to the next could be avoided.”

Labour's answer to the challenge from the private sector is to provide extra resources to an identified intellectual elite of children, at the expense of past efforts to raise educational standards universally.

Blair recognises that it is not enough to present Britain as simply offering a cheap labour platform for international investors, with a workforce largely trained only in basic numeracy, literacy and Information Technology skills. To compete effectively, it must also develop a highly trained layer of those needed in a skills-based economy. The education system must therefore be transformed to meet both essential needs of the rapidly growing global economy—for a cheap labour workforce with basic educational attainment and a narrower layer of highly-skilled labour, particularly in the IT field.

Recent analysis has shown that comparing their GCSE examination results, the top 25 percent of academic achievers in comprehensive schools outperform their counterparts from the selective grammar schools. Blair's education policies are aimed at identifying this layer in the comprehensive system, filtering them out and concentrating resources on them, to the detriment of the rest.

There are currently 500 schools specialising in technology, sport, the arts or languages. Schools that wish to apply for specialist status receive an annual capital grant of £100,000 over three years, plus an extra £123 per pupil. In order to qualify, each school has to raise £50,000 itself.

The plans for the expansion of specialist schools have met some opposition from teachers and school heads. The Secondary Head Teachers Association drafted a 7,000-word reply criticising the government's plans. Its general secretary warned: “The government is risking the creation of a hierarchy of schools in every town, with one school that has to deal with all the really difficult problems.” The funding formula can mean that specialist schools will receive up to £500,000 more funding over three years than other institutions, making them more exclusive and competitive, with working class children largely excluded from entry. Schools will be under increasing pressure to “opt in” to the specialist category in order to secure greater funds.

The groundwork establishing the criteria to be used in selecting pupils for the new specialist schools has already been laid down in the primary school system. The compulsory assessment of all children at age 4-5, through the Baseline Assessment, followed by the Standard Assessment Tests (SATs) at ages 7 and 11, all work to entrench an academic hierarchy. Labour's Literacy and Numeracy Strategies also focus on more formal structured teaching where only the most able can achieve good results. Moreover, classes are divided into ability groups from the top down. Under the new “Gifted and Talented Children” policy brought in this year, primary teachers are obligated to identify the top 10 percent of children in each class and plan for them separately.

Labour's focus on the top layer of pupils essentially means abandoning everyone else to a substandard education. In poorer inner-city schools, teachers are often required to function as little more than child police, trying to keep the lid on a social time bomb produced by urban decay and deprivation.

Labour has tried to compensate for the fact that pupil-teacher ratios are

rising by encouraging an influx of untrained or inappropriately trained amateurs into schools. Those employed as “classroom assistants”, “learning support assistants” and “mentors” are expected to deal with children suffering from serious emotional, physical and behavioural problems, so that teachers can concentrate their efforts on those children deemed more likely to succeed academically.

There is a chronic shortage of teachers, particularly in the areas where Blair wants to establish specialist schools. The first school term this year saw 60,000 children miss out in maths and science lessons due to lack of teachers, and many more receive tuition from those not primarily qualified in the subject. In response to these shortages, knee-jerk measures have been implemented to recruit new teachers en-masse through a “fast track” initiative. Graduates can now qualify to become teachers in just 38 weeks, but this cannot prepare them adequately for the classroom, and children will not receive the level of education and support they need.

A decent education for all is an ideal that must once again be fought for. But this requires the infusion of massive public funds to rebuild schools, equip them with the latest technology and recruit highly trained and qualified teaching staff. Such an approach to education, which places the needs of all pupils above the drive for profit and the elitist principle of selection, must be conceived of as part of a broader political struggle for the creation of a socialist society.



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