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# **Educational Apartheid**

## **A Practical Way Forward**

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**This paper argues for the extension of open access to independent day schools building on the success of our pilot scheme at the Belvedere School in Liverpool.**

It is intended to be a proposal for a practical way to move forward based on real experience rather than a theoretical debate about the merit of various schemes.

The paper is based on our experience and research and analysis done both internally and on our behalf by groups such as The Boston Consulting Group, Liverpool University and the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER).

For the sake of brevity we have not included the backup material with this paper, but it is available on request.

- ◆ Unlike other European countries Britain has a two-nation education system, in which the state schools are viewed as second best. The state/private divide has a depressive effect on education as a whole, and its social, economic and cultural impact is deeply damaging. Partnerships between state and independent schools, in which the Sutton Trust participates, help to blur the divide, but they do not overcome it.
- ◆ The conundrum for policy-makers is that private schools have every right to exist, and individuals every right to choose them. The solutions suggested are mostly impractical. Private schools cannot be abolished. University entrance quotas would discriminate against talent and effort whether in private or state schools. The solution proposed by the Independent Schools Council resembles a new Assisted Places Scheme. And it would be invidious to withdraw charitable status or to impose VAT, which European law in any case precludes. The impracticality of many such proposals engenders a spurious debate, whose result is the maintenance of the *status quo*.
- ◆ The Sutton Trust supports Government educational policy, notably specialist schools, in which it is involved. But it does not believe the gap can be overcome by confining Government efforts to one side of the divide. State schools may continue to improve, but so will the independent sector. At base it is a chicken and egg problem: how can state schools match the independents while the richest 7% of society are not involved?
- ◆ Open Access is a voluntary scheme that would open the best independent day schools to all the talents. Many schools have shown interest. They would remain independent; entrance would be competitive; and fees would be paid on a sliding scale. It is not an extension of the Assisted Places Scheme, or a simple return to the Direct Grant system, since opening 100% of the places would change the nature of the schools.
- ◆ A pilot scheme at Belvedere School in Liverpool, run by the Sutton Trust in partnership with the Girls' Day School Trust, has exceeded expectations. With nearly three-quarters of

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the girls qualifying for assistance with fees, it has a wide social mix, and the opening up of the school has been locally applauded.

- ◆ The benefits of opening 100 top independent day schools would transcend the numbers involved. The eventual cost would be some £140 million per year. It is an illusion to believe that private benefactors will come up with money on this scale, so the bulk of funding would need to come from the Government. As a first step we are proposing that up to 12 schools at an initial cost of some £3 million per year, rising to £25 million after seven years should be opened up.
  - ◆ Open Access would qualify as a public-private partnership, since the schools would offer their resources to all. Objections could be convincingly answered. The Government already spends more on talented pupils, and the average subsidy would be close to the cost of a place in the state system.
- Selection already takes place, on a social and cash basis, whereas Open Access would be meritocratic.
- ◆ For the first time the children of the affluent would compete with those lower down the social scale. Those who did not make the grade might initially resort to second-best independent schools, but over time the “uncertainty principle” would produce a cultural change, encouraging greater interest amongst the affluent and influential in the quality of state education.
  - ◆ Open Access is a third way approach to independent schools. It is not a cure-all but a necessary new dimension. Public opinion would welcome the involvement of independent schools in the national educational effort and the breaking down of barriers of snobbery and exclusivity. At some 0.4% of the education budget, the cost of this important new departure would be relatively small.

**Every country has its educational problems. What distinguishes the British system from that of other European countries is the starkness of the divide between state and independent schools. Only in Britain are the most successful academic schools in the country closed to the vast majority of its citizens. In terms of facilities, staff/pupil ratios and academic performance the gap is vast, and is widening rather than diminishing. The existence of a separate educational sphere patronised chiefly by the affluent and influential, and which holds itself largely aloof from the state sector, has obvious consequences for education as a whole.**

Despite welcome reforms to make state schools less uniform and more competitive the ethos of the two sectors remains so different that it is not too much to speak of a two-nation educational culture. The rigidity and persistence of the state/private divide, and its pernicious consequences for our schools and society, are frequently noted by foreign observers of the British scene, and by expatriates returning home. The educational advantages enjoyed by privileged families are not seen to the same degree in any other advanced country.

These advantages are most glaringly illustrated in higher education. The chance of getting into one of the top dozen universities is vastly increased for those from independent schools. 24% of the students admitted to Oxbridge come from the top 100 independent day schools. This means that some 3% of schools provide almost a quarter of Oxbridge entrants. The malign consequences of a two-tier educational

system are still evident in society, despite the light disguise of a popular culture that transcends class.

The benefits of a private education in terms of guaranteeing a successful career are at least as great as they were 30 years ago, when grammar and direct grant schools posed a challenge to the independent sector. Senior positions in the legal profession, the judiciary, the City and the upper echelons of the media are still filled chiefly by those who have been independently educated. In a functioning meritocracy the dominance of Oxbridge and other top universities would be natural, since they are in theory open to all. But the same cannot be said of the dominance of the exclusive independent schools that feed them.

It is no use saying that the element of privilege is diminished now that the independent sector is more academically selective, since that begs the question of who can afford to send their children to them. As Adonis and Pollard noted in

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their book *A Class Act*, meritocracy works most smoothly and efficiently amongst the existing elites, for lack of real competition from lower down the scale. There are now more pupils in independent schools than ever before. As the effects work through, we could see an even greater domination of ex-private school pupils in leading positions in society.

No one would deny that these are frequently able people. Yet the international competition is mounting. How long Britain will be able to recruit elites worthy of the name from a small social caste and maintain its status in the world, whether in the economic, educational or cultural fields, must be open to doubt. A nation that will be increasingly obliged to live literally off its wits cannot afford the exclusivity of the past, or the inverted snobbery with which it has sometimes been replaced: it must recognise and nurture the outstanding talents of young people, wherever they are to be found.

The conundrum for policy-makers is simple to state: the private schools have every legal and moral right to exist, and many are first-class educational institutions. There are excellent schools in the state sector too, not all of them selective, which perform well with their mixed-ability intake and despite limited facilities. All that needs to be done, it may therefore be said, is to generalise best practice and bring the levels of the

state system as a whole up to that of the average independent school.

In our view things are far less simple. The roots of the problem lie deep in our educational and social history, and the existence of the state/private gulf exerts a depressive effect on state education. This frustrates attempts to equalise performance. There is talk of making our state schools world class. Yet Britain can never develop a high quality state education system whilst the most powerful in society have no direct interest in it. If the damaging effects on the educational system overall are taken into account, the state/private divide in education is a major obstacle – perhaps the major obstacle – to the Government's stated intention of transforming Britain into a modern, meritocratic society, a society which has both ladders and a safety net.

Unlike in European countries, state schools in Britain are often seen as intrinsically second class, and for those with the ability to pay they are mostly a second choice. If this were a misperception or mere snobbery matters would be easier to resolve, but in too many cases the perception is justified. In independent day schools (this paper leaves boarding schools to one side, since the number of boarders form a small proportion now of the total in independent schools and opening them up would not be cost effective) the resources are virtually double those in the state sector

(£6,500 per pupil as against £3,300)<sup>1</sup>. The 2000 census of independent schools carried out by ISCIS (Independent Schools Council Information Service) revealed an average staff/pupil ratio of 1:9.9, compared with the DfES's figures of 1:18.6 for state schools. This gap has been widening, despite the Government's best efforts. Although only 7% of pupils attend independent schools they account for over 13% of teachers.

A review of the qualifications of the teaching staff at independent schools shows that there are many Oxbridge and other Russell Group university graduates with good first degrees and PhDs teaching in these schools. This is in contrast to the state sector. Is it right that only the children of the wealthiest 7% of society should benefit from these highly qualified teachers? The intake to independent schools is of course academically and socially selective, the ethos is unashamedly competitive and academic aspirations are higher. The result is some dismal statistics:

- ◆ although only 7% of the population attend independent schools 85 of the top hundred schools (in terms of examination results) are independent;
- ◆ in *The Times* 2000 list, of the top 167, 100 were independent day schools,

40 more were boarding schools, and only 27 state schools (of which many were selective grammars);

- ◆ a majority of the top 500 schools are independents too.

Suggestions that the gap is narrowing would be heartening if they could be sustained, but the signs are not encouraging. In the year 2000 36% of independent school A-level entries were awarded grade A, an increase of 1.2% on the previous year – four times greater than the national increase, where the average A-level scores are less than half, at 17.8%.

The Assisted Places Scheme was a limited, much abused and conceptually flawed system. It was right to abolish it, but now that it has gone and nothing better has replaced it, the gap between the state and private domains is starker than ever. The Sutton Trust has participated alongside Government in independent/state school partnerships designed to encourage co-operation, and looks forward to continuing in this work. The joint activities are successful as far as they go, but it would be wrong to exaggerate their impact overall. Such schemes do something to blur the divide, but although we would like to see them extended, they cannot be seen as a solution.

<sup>1</sup> Much depends on whether capital expenditure is included. DfES figures give the unit cost of maintained secondary education in 1997-98 as £2,340, excluding capital and LEA allocation.



The purpose of this paper is not to rehearse familiar issues, but to put forward realistic answers. It is fashionable to decry the effects of educational apartheid, not just in the left of centre press but also in *The Spectator* or *The Times*, yet there is a dearth of sound ideas for tackling the great divide. Most of the ideas put forward, however sincere, are impracticable:

◆ **abolishing independent schools**

However opposed some may be to them in principle, abolition is a non-starter. Quite apart from the politics, it would contravene the European Convention on Human Rights. In any event it would be wrong in principle for a government wilfully to destroy distinguished places of learning, or to ban its citizens from choosing to attend them.

◆ **university entrance quotas**

This would be seen as a punitive measure discriminating against talent and effort, whether in private or successful state schools. A by-product of such a policy could be that under-qualified pupils would be given university places.

◆ **removing charitable status, and charging VAT on school fees**

This might possibly be implemented by a Government with a large majority, but it would also be seen as

negative, vindictive and inequitable, and of little or no help to the state sector. The fact is that the parents of children at independent schools pay their taxes as well as fees. To impose VAT would be a breach of European Law, which prohibits VAT on education expenditures. Any punitive financial measures would cause less successful schools to go to the wall. The net effect would be to put independent education out of reach of more middle income families, thereby rendering the schools even more exclusive than they are.

◆ **abolishing selection**

In his pamphlet *A Level Playing Field* Harry Brighouse, Professor at the London Institute of Education, proposes that private schools should be prohibited from selecting on the basis of merit. Although he makes some telling points, there is limited advantage in discussing the pros and cons of an idea that is legally and politically unfeasible.

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More positive ideas have come from the independent schools themselves. Though we welcome them as a contribution to the debate, we differ about the principles on which they are based:

◆ **means testing**

“Oasis”, the scheme recently proposed by the Independent Schools Council, suggests that the independent sector should offer a number of “open access” places at certain schools on a means tested basis, to be paid for by parental contributions, a contribution from the schools, and the cost of state provision. This is essentially a variant of the Assisted Places Scheme, and would suffer from much the same defects and objections, with a minority of places available. Most fundamentally, it would not be “open access” in the sense the Sutton Trust understands the term: i.e. access to all places to be open to all those who demonstrate the potential to benefit. In the ISC proposal, the schools would retain their fundamentally exclusive nature.

◆ **another variant of means testing**

is being put forward by Anthony Seldon, Headmaster of Brighton College, who will be advocating (in a pamphlet to be published by the Social Market Foundation) that all parents of children at state schools should be means tested and pay fees, thereby raising expenditure per pupil to independent levels. The popular reaction is not hard to imagine, and it can safely be assumed that, in current circumstances, the Government would be unlikely to consider such a step. As for voucher schemes, in the highly specific British context there are major drawbacks, and no successful working examples are in existence.

Surveying the ideas on offer, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that few of them are practical proposals. Their impracticality can engender a spurious debate, whose outcome is the maintenance of the *status quo*. The impression is that the country has averted its gaze from an issue it knows to be fundamental for its future but that it is simply not prepared to face.

**With the exception of the independent/state school partnerships previously referred to, the policy of the previous Labour administration on the state/private divide appears to have been to set the question to one side, in the hope that reforms in the maintained schools would gradually bridge the gap in achievement. The Sutton Trust supports the measures the Government has taken to date to improve standards in maintained schools and shares the hopes that they will bear fruit. In particular it supports the policy of the diversification of comprehensives, and the Trust itself is committed to sponsoring four specialist schools per year. Over time we should move away from a position where for a large majority of parents and pupils there is little real choice between independent schools and comprehensives of a standardised type, save a handful of grammars for those who live nearby and are able to get in.**

Yet we remain concerned by the strategy of confining efforts to one side of the divide. The Government has adopted an unthreatening posture towards the independent sector, and we are not proposing that this policy be reversed. Yet doing a minimum to draw the private schools into the national educational endeavour seems ill-advised. Like building a bridge from only one bank of a river, it is both inefficient and hazardous, with no guarantee that the other bank will ever be reached.

The problems are time and resources. Having ratcheted up standards in primary schools, the new Government intends to concentrate on the secondaries. This makes excellent sense, but the problems here are more entrenched and, unlike primary schools, will often

involve structural change. Even if reforms go smoothly it could take massive resources and a decade or two for state secondary schools in all parts of the country to improve to the point where parents were prepared to abandon the independent sector in any number. One only has to think of the immensity of the task in the inner cities, and notably London, where one in eight parents – well above the national average – currently patronises the independent sector. There is certainly no sign of any impending exodus from independent schools, and the percentage of pupils in private education has essentially remained the same since 1997.

We start from a position where, according to a survey conducted by MORI for the Independent Schools

Council Information Service (ISCIS), a significant majority of the electorate, including a majority of Labour voters, would send their children to private schools if they could afford to do so. And although fees are rising at more than double the rate of inflation, incomes have risen strongly too, especially at higher levels, along with property values. One can never exclude the element of snobbery in independent education, but the motives of most fee-paying parents are increasingly utilitarian. Studies carried out by the Institute of Education and the LSE on the benefits of independent education lead us to believe that it adds up to a 1 grade per A-level advantage.

Of course the economy could worsen, and the number of independently educated pupils could fall, though to rely on that happening to mitigate the situation would be a strange position. Even the last recession in the early nineties, and the collapse of property prices, had remarkably little effect on the determination of parents to secure what they see as the best for their children. The numbers in independent education fell away slightly, but soon recovered. The practice of consigning children to independent schools is deeply entrenched at the apex of society, and there is

no lack of people somewhat lower down the income scale who are eager to join them.

The implications of all this for Government policy towards the independent sector seem to us important. The proportion of parents opting for private education could well increase or at least remain static even if the performance of state secondary schools improves, as the country becomes richer and disposable income increases and as the independent schools sell their product more aggressively.

There is a more fundamental issue that could work against any narrowing of the state/private gap in the short and medium term. Raising state schools to the level of the independent sector has a chicken and egg aspect. It is generally agreed that there is a limit to how far state schools can be improved without the involvement of the most influential people in society. On the other hand it is not in human nature for people to sacrifice the advantage they currently enjoy until they are certain they can get a similar level of education for free. Hence the chicken and egg problem.

Though we expect the Government's reforms to prove beneficial, the absence of what one may loosely call the senior professional classes from state schools will continue to exert a dampening effect on expectations in those schools. The

growing tendency for parents as a whole to be involved in education makes the loss of their influence more pronounced. The same is true of the national educational debate, where the input and involvement of the top seven percent of society will be limited by the fact that they have no personal stake in the outcome. They may make the requisite noises of concern, but that concern is unlikely to run deep. It could even be argued that it is not in their interests that state schools should improve beyond a certain point, since that would undermine their investment in independent schools by exposing their children to greater competition.

So while it is true that reforms at primary level and the diversification of comprehensives may raise the state sector's game, the absence of the richest, most highly educated tier of society will both delay and limit any serious improvement. The difficulty of recruiting high quality teachers to state schools, which the private sector suffers from to a lesser extent, also seems likely to act as a brake on the improvement in the performance of comprehensives, whether specialised or not.

Increased government spending should give a steady boost to maintained schools. But when the Prime Minister spoke early in the election campaign

about the need to bring provision in the state sector up to the level of the private sector, we assume his remarks represented a long-term aspiration, rather than short-term policy. And while the Sutton Trust is much in favour of better staff/pupil ratios, we recognise that financial factors will tend to limit the state sector's ability to compete in this regard, while individual parents will always be prepared to buy educational advantage for their children. The fact that a recent Independent Schools Conference was entitled "How to stay ahead of the state sector" suggests that they are fully alert to their task.

If competition from the state sector is stepped up the independent sector will be sufficiently flexible and imaginative to more than match it. The increase in Government expenditure, however imposing in public terms, will not do much to close the gap in resources: fees at independent schools have risen partly to pay for ever-improving modern facilities, e.g. in science and technology, but mainly to improve staff/pupil ratios. And as a private sector employer the independent sector can be relied upon to ensure that it attracts the best teachers on the market, notably those in scarce supply, in subjects such as physics, mathematics and modern languages. As a result, the teacher shortage will be

much less acute in independent schools.

The gap could grow in other ways: at present nearly half the children in independent secondary schools have not attended an independent primary school. There is an increasing tendency for independents to start their own junior schools. There has also been rapid recent growth in private nursery schools. The effect of such trends is to polarise state and private education still more, as increasing numbers of independently educated pupils have no contact with the majority of schoolchildren from their nursery days through to university.

Suggestions that some independent schools are growing dissatisfied with A-levels and are contemplating adopting the International Baccalaureate, a more demanding examination system both intellectually and in the resources required to teach it, are another cloud on the horizon. Though it is unclear how far this will develop, the very notion of a two-tier system of examinations, one largely confined to fee-paying schools and the other for the rest, could only reinforce the divide.

In buying independent education parents are in effect buying privileged access to leading universities. The question of access was thrust into the

limelight not long ago as a result of the Laura Spence incident, which coincided with the publication of a study of this problem by the Sutton Trust. Leaving aside the rights and wrongs of that individual case, the affair dramatised the imbalance in admissions to Oxford in particular and leading universities in general and has led to £6 million a year being made available to those universities to fund access initiatives. A good deal of the problem is due to the reluctance of state pupils to apply in sufficient numbers. There could scarcely be better proof of the persistence of an outdated 'us and them' ethos in our education system than the fact that it is necessary to encourage able children, their teachers and their parents, to apply for the places they deserve at our top universities.

The Sutton Trust has been involved in the university field for five years now, with some success, notably by funding summer schools and outreach programmes. It welcomes the fact that the Government has now generalised the summer school concept, and has made specific funds available to universities to enable them to intensify their outreach work. According to studies carried out by the Trust<sup>2</sup> state school pupils are not

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<sup>2</sup> Entry to Leading Universities, The Sutton Trust, May 2000

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receiving their share of the places justified by their A-level results. The latest Government initiatives could do something to remedy this. Yet while the gulf in average examination performance between state and independent schools remains as wide as it is, short of an active policy of positive discrimination, which we would advise against, and which would be strongly resisted by the universities, the imbalance in admissions to the most prestigious institutions seems likely to continue, albeit at a somewhat lower level.

Important and fruitful as the work of encouraging comprehensive pupils to apply may be, we should never lose sight of the fact that this is an artificial procedure, arising from the need to palliate the malign effects of the state/private divide in schools. Remedial measures of this kind are frequently necessary, but to institutionalise them can imply a renunciation of any hope of resolving the basic issue. It is extraordinary to think that the notion amongst state sector pupils, that Oxbridge is not for them, since it is territory peopled largely by private school elites, is more widespread today than it was 30 or 40 years ago, and that in this particular field there has been a measure of social regression since the Sixties.

The result of the trends sketched out above could be a position where, despite progress in the state sector, and efforts to narrow the gap, the divide could remain indefinitely, or even grow. For the foreseeable future parents who persist in opting for the private sector will be making a sound investment. Certainly it seems that the country as a whole is resigned to the prospect of educational apartheid continuing indefinitely. For confirmation of this expectation one only has to look at the effort the financial services industry devotes to devising ever more ingenious long-term arrangements to pay school fees.

Nothing in this paper should be read as implying that all the problems of the British education system can be resolved simply by tackling the problems raised by independent schools. That is far from our position. The Sutton Trust is not merely engaged at the “elite” end of the educational ladder, but involved at all stages in the education process, from pre-school programmes through to university summer schools, and understands how much can and is being done. But without tackling this fundamental problem we do not see how progress overall can be assured. At the very least it seems to us prudent to work from both ends of the divide at once to bridge the gap.



## The Open Access Scheme

**The principles of the scheme proposed by the Sutton Trust for involving the independent sector in the national educational effort, while maintaining its independence, are we hope broadly familiar. The Trust has demonstrated its confidence in them by establishing a pilot scheme in partnership with The Girls' Day School Trust at The Belvedere School in Liverpool.**

The essentials of the scheme are:

- ◆ Independent day schools that are at present open only to those who can pay the fees (some bursaries apart) would be opened to all on a means-tested basis. Membership of the open access sector would be voluntary, though only schools of high academic quality would be admitted. The only pressure on schools to join would come as a result of their need to maintain academic parity of esteem with a new, dynamic sector which, being open to all, would draw on a wider pool of talent than current independent schools.
  - ◆ The schools joining the scheme would retain their independence. For most this would be a precondition of opening up: if they did not continue to control e.g. their syllabus and teacher recruitment, few if any schools would volunteer for change.
- Given that state funds would be involved, there would be some need for monitoring performance through a "light touch" regime.
- ◆ Admittance would be competitive, but the system of selection would be far more sophisticated than the old 11-plus (see the relevant passage on the Belvedere School on page 19).
  - ◆ Fees for successful applicants would be charged on a sliding scale, with the richest paying the same as before, shading off to the poorest, who would pay nothing. Assessment would take account of parents' assets, as well as income. In this and other respects it would be stricter than the system used for the Assisted Places Scheme.
  - ◆ The size of the shortfall in the school's fee income would depend on its success in recruiting pupils from



low or intermediate social backgrounds. In practice each school would vary according to its catchment area, with schools close to areas of mixed social character likely to cost more. Basing our calculations on experience at the Belvedere School, we would estimate that pupils needing some level of funding would be approximately two-thirds. The shortfall in fee income could be made up by the school's own funds (where these exist), and private patrons (where these are forthcoming), but the main onus would be on the Government.

- ◆ We have provisionally assessed the cost of opening up 100 top performing day schools, comprising 62,000 pupils at a rounded figure of £6,500 per pupil. Assuming all agreed to participate over time, and 50% of the fees were paid by the state, the cost would start at £30 million per year and eventually reach £200 million, when the scheme is fully operational. In reality this figure would be

reduced in the light of savings in the state sector. The amount saved would depend on how many of the "displaced" private pupils ended up in the state sector. Initially our guess would be that there would not be many, and that most such children would in practice be accommodated elsewhere in the independent system.

- ◆ The net cost would also depend on the basis on which savings to the state sector were calculated, e.g. full cost or variable cost.<sup>3</sup> On the basis that state places work out at around £3,300 per pupil, including capital expenditure, on a full cost basis and £2,000 on a variable cost basis, and that one-third of the vacated places in state schools are taken by "displaced" private pupils, the total cost would shrink to £110 million assuming full cost savings, and to £140 million assuming variable cost saving. In practice this saving could manifest itself by freeing up much needed resources in the State Sector.

<sup>3</sup> There is also an argument that the fees of the average former Direct Grant School, which predominate in the 100 best performing day schools, are much less than double maintained school costs when capital expenditure, LEA administration and direct government grants are taken into account.

- ◆ Extensive soundings by the Sutton Trust have revealed a high level of interest amongst a wide variety of schools all over the country.

The Sutton Trust scheme has sometimes been misleadingly presented in the press, and it helps to define what we mean if we make it clear what open access is not. The two things that it is most definitely not are a simple return to the direct grant system, or to the Assisted Places Scheme (APS).

Insofar as there are superficial similarities with the old direct grant system, this is not something to be ashamed of: in its time it served as an incipient “third way” between state schools and the private sector, and many successful people in society today from modest backgrounds are products of the direct grant system. Of the quality of the schools there can be no doubt: today 61 of the 100 best performing independent day schools were formerly direct grant or grammar schools. And one reason that many independent schools are interested in open access status is that they have a tradition of educating bright children irrespective of their parents’ ability to pay the fees.

But times change, and the Sutton Trust has no interest in merely setting the

clock back. The principle of private/public co-operation once enshrined in the direct grant system must be democratised and taken forward. There is a world of difference between these schools as they were and what the Trust is proposing.

There were 180 schools in the direct grant scheme. 62% of pupils paid no fees, 10% paid partial fees and 28% paid full fees. There was no means test so that many of those who paid no fees at all came from parents who could afford to pay fees, and those who paid full fees were admitted at a lower standard than the others. Hence the indeterminate status of the schools, and their qualified success as a vehicle for promoting educational meritocracy.

Like the move from a partial to a full electoral franchise, our proposal for 100% open access to independent schools would provoke a qualitative as well as a quantitative change, transforming the whole nature of the schools. In keeping with a more modern ethos it would exclude all remnants of social and financial privilege and those who could afford it would pay.

The differences between open access and the APS are even more fundamental. To mention just a few: those selected under the APS scheme were not

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invariably the brightest, only 60% had to come from state schools, and the scheme was misused to accommodate e.g. siblings; it took no account of the real financial status of applicants, e.g. their houses, and consequently the system was wide open to abuse. More fundamentally, whatever its ostensible purpose in practice the APS did very little to diminish the state/private divide. By granting a limited number of places (in 1985 they amounted to a mere 13% of the total at independent schools, much less than the direct grant schools) from within a closed system, and by its

top/down ethos, in a sense it could be said to have cemented it.

The crucial point is that, in the APS, the children of parents willing to pay fees were in no danger of being excluded by an influx of socially humbler but academically more able pupils. Indeed they would never have been tested against them for purposes of access. Therefore the APS had no element of displacement. The open access system has been wrongly described as an extension of the APS, but it is qualitatively different. It would be more accurate to describe it as the APS turned on its head.

**Unlike other solutions canvassed, the open access scheme has been put to the test, and the results to date exceed our hopes. The Belvedere School, an independent girls' school in Liverpool, was opened to all on a means tested basis in the academic year 2000. A former Direct Grant school, it is a member of the Girls' Day School Trust (GDST). This prestigious institution has twenty-five member schools who dispense a substantial number of bursaries, and is contributing both money and experience to the running and financing of the Belvedere School together with the Trust.**

The Belvedere was selected from amongst a number of candidates, partly for its geographical location, lying as it does close to areas which comprise a social mix. To act as a true experiment it was essential that pupils of all backgrounds should be eligible to apply, and its catchment area in South Liverpool extends as far as Warrington and Widnes, Rainhill and St Helens to the East and Crosby to the North.

In opening up an independent day school 100%, the Sutton Trust and the GDST were treading virgin territory. For all our efforts to ensure equal opportunity, we could not be sure pupils from the upper income bracket would not dominate the intake for familiar socio-cultural reasons. Yet the opposite happened. In 1999, the year before opening up, about a quarter of the pupils were receiving assistance with fees, mostly through the Assisted Places

Scheme: last year the figure leapt to three quarters, under stricter means test arrangements. The social mix we have so far achieved has been greater than we hoped for. In simple terms, the span of occupation of parents of pupils at the Belvedere School now runs from bartenders to barristers.

We were careful to advertise the new opportunities as widely as possible, and the first effect of the opening up of the school was that the number of applications for places was up two and a half times, compared with the preceding year. There were 367 applications for 72 places. These included 25 from the Belvedere junior school and about the same from other independent schools. The rest came from county and voluntary aided primaries. As a result, those awarded places were far more representative of the Merseyside population than in previous years. Many bright children

were admitted whose parents would never previously have thought of applying because of their inability to pay the fees.

Rather than leave things to chance, the Sutton Trust appointed an outreach officer to visit county primaries, inform them of the new opportunities for their pupils, and seek to dispel prejudice or suspicions. She has been extraordinarily successful in prevailing on staff to encourage parents and children to apply for places. She has also reported a gratifyingly low level of resistance to the Belvedere's recruitment policies amongst state primary teachers on the grounds that they are elitist.

The entry procedures were designed to assess not just past and current performance, but potential. And while care was taken to avoid positive discrimination, where other things were equal, some allowance was made for the type of school the applicant had attended and their home background. Verbal and non-verbal reasoning tests were devised by the National Foundation for Educational Research, and English and mathematics papers were set by the school. An ad-

missions committee consisting of three people decides offers based on merit.

An independent assessment of the school's first year of operation on the open access principle was carried out by Alan Smithers, Head of the Centre for Education and Employment Research at the University of Liverpool.<sup>4</sup> The question he set out to answer was: what impact is open access having on entry to the school in terms of ability and background? In particular, is it attracting very able children from low-income homes? He identified some problems, but concluded that "even in its first year the scheme can be counted a success." As the years go by, a larger proportion of girls will be recruited by open access and the perception of the school will change. We would expect an increasing number of parents and teachers to understand that a change of culture had taken place, and the number of pupils from county primaries and low income families to increase. The entry statistics for the year show that the school has built on the success of the first year.

The cost of the scheme naturally increases with its success. If the pilot scheme had failed abjectly, and all those

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<sup>4</sup> Evaluation of the Open Access Scheme at The Belvedere School, GDST by Alan Smithers and Pamela Robinson (December 2000)

gaining entry based on merit had come from affluent upper middle class families, who were willing and able to pay fees, then the subsidy (other than the cost of the admissions procedure) would have been nil. But the success of the scheme made the cost, shared equally between the Sutton Trust and the Girls' Day School Trust, somewhat higher than anticipated. It will increase as the new pupils are recruited. In its first year the cost was relatively small: £178,000. We estimate that, if present admission trends continue, in its seventh year the cost of the scheme will rise to approximately £2 million per annum.

The opening up of the Belvedere School was well received locally, with a minimum of complaints about the school "creaming off" talent from state schools. Indeed the change of status was celebrated by most of the local media as

progressive. We anticipate that the gradually evolving ethos of the school as the scheme works through, and the perception that it has become more open, will enable it to integrate more effectively into the community.

This public reaction is especially heartening. It confirms the Sutton Trust's view that, when the choice lies between an old-style independent school, and one that is seen to be an extension of choice for all, any qualms about selection take a back seat, and common sense prevails. The public evidently understands that, though the Belvedere remains independent, open access has changed the nature of the school. Local master classes for gifted children are now run by the Belvedere, which also help to open its doors more widely.

**The Sutton Trust is non-political, yet it is obliged to take account of the political atmosphere. It has no wish to put forward proposals that it believes to be desirable but which common sense suggests are politically out of court. The Trust believes that what it is proposing would be entirely feasible. Ideally it would like the Government to underwrite a scheme to open up 100 of the best performing independent day schools. It may be felt that, despite our arguments to the contrary, £200 million (minus savings) is too large a sum to commit at once. Naturally we would argue that there is a measure of urgency, insofar as such changes in our educational culture take time to feed through and show their benefits. Rather than shelve action indefinitely, it would be possible to proceed in stages. An initial commitment to open access in say 12 independent schools might be easier.**

The cost would be proportionately smaller – approximately £25 million after seven years – a modest figure in Government terms, which would make it even harder for critics to argue that too much money was being spent on the elite education of a few. Indeed in the first few years, as in the Belvedere school, the costs would be a fraction of that – a total of £3½ million spread over the dozen schools. A further advantage of a piecemeal approach would be that, even if the Government were to commit itself to opening 100 schools, involvement would be voluntary, and it might take time for the schools concerned to commit themselves to joining the

scheme. It was always assumed that open access would be a cumulative process.

The Sutton Trust has been contacted by the heads of many independent schools, and we are confident that there would be no problem in recruiting 12 initial candidates.

There would be no risk of embarrassment should one or several schools end up with a relatively small increase in non-fee payers, although we consider that unlikely, given the involvement of a recruitment officer and effective local publicity. If it were to happen the parents would pay fees as before, so nothing would be lost. To that extent what we are

proposing, politically speaking, is a failsafe system. On the more optimistic assumption that the pilot scheme was seen to work, the reform would receive a good press and more schools would show

interest in joining. The scheme would then be seen to be demand-led, and the number of schools involved could expand as swiftly as the Government allowed.



**There is every reason to believe that the opening of hitherto private establishments to all the talents would be as welcome to the national public as the new Belvedere School is locally. The open access scheme would also fit well with the Government's overall strategy of diversifying schools, and be a natural extension of local choice for children of differing aptitudes. Able children too have special needs. Though the primary purpose would be educational rather than social, there would be no reason to discourage the media or the public from interpreting it as a radical departure whose social effect would be to break down barriers, and militate against the old ethos of snobbery, divisiveness and exclusion.**

Free public provision in the independent sector of education would be an extension of the Public/Private Partnership (PPP) principle to an area which needs it most, and where (unlike the NHS) it is unlikely to be contested. The MORI poll for the Independent Schools Council Information Service (ISCIS) already cited showed that the use of Government funds to enable children to attend independent schools was supported by a margin of 3:1. Our proposal is similar in principle to the Government's City Academy initiative, in that the concept is that of an independent school funded in part by the state. There seems no reason why the same approach should not be adopted with independent schools that undertook to work for the public good.

Public acceptance would be increased if open access could be presented as a joint

initiative to which the private sector (other than parents) were seen to contribute. But these contributions are likely to form only a small percentage of the total cost, and there is no prospect whatever of private interests financing a significant number of schools. There are simply not enough potential donors ready for the long-term commitment involved. It could however be argued that, by making their existing buildings, facilities, teaching staff etc available to all comers, rather than confining them to a socially select, fee-paying few, the schools were contributing in kind to the national effort, and that this alone justified the inclusion of the open access scheme in the category of PPPs.

Popular support would not prevent the scheme from coming under fire. Attacks could be convincingly rebutted.

◆ **The scheme is a disguised attack on the entire independent sector, a measure of quasi-nationalisation.**

Answer: Each school would be free to enter as it wished. If some wished to back out after joining, that too would be up to them.

◆ **It is an attack on parents' freedom of choice, and how to spend their money.**

Answer: Nothing in the scheme would prevent the establishment of new private schools, should there be a demand.

◆ **Why abolish the APS only to put something similar in its place?**

Answer: the question has been largely dealt with above. One could add that whereas at present none but a tiny number of pupils have a chance to attend a leading independent school, tens of thousands would in future have that chance. Moreover the open access entry system would retain none of the old-fashioned "charity-boy" flavour: entrance would be open to everyone by right. At Belvedere there is no distinction between fee payers and non-fee payers and the same principle would apply to all open access schools.

◆ **The scheme is divisive/elitist.**

Answer: It would be far less divisive than the current system. Open access schools will be far more integrated in

the community than now and would become part of the education provision for all. All countries have elites. What matters is whether they are open or closed, hereditary or democratic, social elites or elites of ability.

◆ **The scheme is selective.**

Answer: these independent schools are already selective, so there would be no increase in selection. They would not co-operate on any other basis, and it is illusory to believe that non-selectivity could be imposed by law. If the choice is between opening them up and leaving them as they are, surely it is better to accept the element of selectivity? As time goes on state schools will benefit as some parents understand that buying educational advantage is not as easy as it was, and become involved in improving the system. The new schools would be roughly analogous to the most prestigious lycées in France – a meritocratic system that has admirers in this country, or the Magnet schools in the United States. Ideological objections to the chance to open up the independent sector will not be shared by the man or woman in the street. One man's selectivity is another's extension of choice.

◆ **It creams off talent from local state schools.**

Answer: so, to an extent, do private

schools. In terms of absolute numbers the difference to individual LEAs would be small, less than one per class, and unlike the 11-plus, there would be no question of leaving their former classmates with a sense of failure. The pilot project at Belvedere has evoked very little resentment in local schools.

◆ **Why should some pupils have more spent on them than others? The money would be better spent on improving the state system.**

Answer: More money is being spent on the state system. In any case many of those admitted who would have gone to state schools would only require partial state funding, due to funding by parents and to a lesser extent by the school and private donors. Hence the average state subsidy would be little more than a third greater than the cost per pupil in state schools. The principle of spending more on able children is already admitted, in sixth forms and universities and in a range of out of school activities. Open access amounts to the same principle being applied during normal lessons, in a more concentrated and efficient form. The cost over time would be 0.4% of the total educational budget. In terms of helping to overcome a divide that is enormously costly in educational, economic and social terms, it is cheap at the price.

◆ **The problems of the British education system are not at the top, but at the middle and the bottom.**

Answer: There are problems about access to the top, as well as at other levels. The problems are interlinked. Nothing in the scheme would conflict with the Government's strategies to improve performance at other levels, e.g. to upgrade the quality of vocational education. It makes sense to tackle interlinked problems in parallel.

◆ **This is simply re-creating the grammar school system.**

Answer: No, this is a new type of school, which of their nature will be limited in number. There is no comparison between a generalised 11-plus system and what we have in mind.

◆ **The Government should look for other ways of achieving the same objective.**

Answer: despite decades of hand-wringing, no practicable alternative schemes for overcoming the state/private divide have been forthcoming. Objectors are in effect arguing that the best policy is to do nothing. What Mark Twain said about the weather is true of educational apartheid as well: everyone complains but no one does anything about it.

**We do not claim that the reaction of all parents denied a place in their preferred independent school would be to send their children to a local comprehensive and begin agitating for higher standards. It would be open to parents of rejected children to send them to second or third best private schools with lower academic entry levels, or to opt for boarding schools if they could afford them. Nor would there be anything to prevent more independent schools from being set up. But increasingly they would be buying snob value, rather than educational advantage.**

The effect could be salutary from many points of view. For the first time in decades private schools which declined to open their doors would cease to have an easy academic ride, and parents would be less happy to pay high fees for schools that no longer achieved the best results. Concern amongst parents about their children's educational prospects is nowadays intense, and even if the numbers of those initially affected were small, the cumulative effects of what might be called the "uncertainty principle" would be great.

It would be as if an exclusive club were suddenly to announce that its members were to be obliged to resign and re-apply for membership in competition with the *hoi polloi*. Over time there would be a parallel change in the attitude of teachers and parents in the state sector to those independent schools that became open access. They would no

longer be places to be envied or resented, but a de facto extension of the system, rather like universities, which select their intake but where opportunities are open to all.

Another eventual benefit would be in recruitment to leading universities. As last year's Sutton Trust report demonstrated, at present this is weighted heavily in favour of private schools, more than their examination results warrant. Pupils at open access schools, unlike many able pupils at comprehensives, would lack neither the formal academic credentials, the encouragement nor the self-confidence to apply for entry to Oxbridge and other top universities. The effect could be a positive evolution in the make-up of universities hitherto perceived as socially elite, without any sacrifice (if anything rather the opposite) of academic standards.

The objectives of the Sutton Trust do not include social engineering, yet it cannot ignore the effects on society of the educational reform it proposes. The social benefits of the new schools would be indirect, but highly significant. Up till now the children of the affluent and the privileged have gone their own way from their earliest days at school, untroubled by any challenge from lower down the social scale. For the first time in recent educational history in Britain open access schools would bring pupils from diverse backgrounds into direct competition. On the Continent this happens far more often.

In individual cases the result could sometimes be disappointed expectations for their children amongst our current, often independently educated elites. Yet this can hardly be seen as a disincentive to opening up. As the recent report by the Performance and Innovation Unit of the Cabinet Office concluded, genuine meritocracy must inevitably entail a measure of downward mobility amongst the middle or upper middle classes.

In education the logical alternative to a meritocratic approach would be to renounce diversification of comprehensive schools in the interests of egalitarianism, and to leave the private sector alone, since the only realistic

solution to the state/private divide would involve selection. The irony is that hostility to a meritocracy in education should bring together egalitarians and social elitists, and that these theoretical opposites should in practice share an interest in leaving things much as they are. It scarcely needs to be said that the result of such a *status quo* policy would be to perpetuate the very inequality of opportunity the egalitarians object to.

It is certain that any change in the status of independent schools, even if voluntary, would be viewed by those potentially affected with suspicion. Some of those middle class parents making sacrifices to educate their children privately would feel aggrieved, and there would be apprehensions amongst the affluent about what they may choose to see as a form of discrimination designed to close the doors of "their" schools in their faces, and to deny their children access to the schools their parents had attended. Some measure of resentment at the top of society would be unavoidable, since a meritocracy involves losers.

It would however be wrong to suggest that the middle classes as a whole would resent the changes, since the vast majority of middle class pupils do not attend independent schools. For them,

on the contrary, new opportunities would open up, as well as for those from more modest backgrounds. Also, those they displaced would not be swept away at one go, and the social composition of whole schools would not change overnight. Here too the process would be gradual, entry form by entry form, year by year. Obviously, current fee-payers would not be instantly ejected.

Having stressed the beneficial impact of open access for the future of education overall, we would not wish to play down the negative impact on those affected on the ground. Yet it is important to keep the numbers in perspective. The figure of 7% includes boarding schools, preparatory schools, and independent schools of insufficient academic standing to qualify for open access status. It is possible to make a rough calculation of the number who would face refusal. If a

dozen schools were opened and the Belvedere pattern were repeated at a somewhat lower level, some 60% of those who might have expected to be admitted would fail to gain places. If each of the 12 schools had an entry of 80 pupils, the result in the first year would be some 576 families –  $12 \times 48$  – who failed to gain admittance to their preferred private school. If 100 schools were opened up, the (equally theoretical figure) would be 4,800.

Such people would no doubt feel disgruntled, but would be unlikely to inspire widespread sympathy outside their own milieu, or in the press. In this context it is noteworthy that both *The Times* and *The Daily Telegraph* have in the past voiced general support for the principles of the open access scheme.

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## Conclusion

It is for the Government to decide its educational strategy. But The Sutton Trust is convinced that open access would represent a genuine third way between a laissez-faire approach to independent schools on the one hand, and a punitive attitude on the other. The proposals would be seen as a fresh departure. They would do much to break the logjam over state and independent education that has for too long dammed up the country's educational potential, and help to release the talents of the entire country.





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