Open Access

A Practical Way Forward

New Developments

June 2004

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Preface

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 GDST in Liverpool.[1]

It is intended as a proposal for a practical way to move forward, rather than a theoretical discussion 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.

[1] The Belvedere is one of the 25 schools of the Girls' Day School Trust, the partner of the Sutton trust in the pilot Open Access Scheme described here.

The GDST was founded in 1872 and since then has provided a first rate education for girls, from 3–18, in its academically selective day schools in England and in Wales. This is the largest group of independent schools in the UK, with 20,000 pupils and 3,500 staff, currently educating c.9% of all girls in the fee-paying sector.

The GDST is one of the largest charities in the UK. It was a significant partner in the Assisted Places Scheme and now continues to provide access to its schools for able girls by making a substantial investment in its own bursary programme. Currently some 16% of senior school pupils receive some level of financial assistance. GDST does not offer staff discounts on fees nor does it offer sibling discounts to fee-payers.

GDST schools' A-level and GCSE results consistently out-perform both the maintained sector and all other independent schools by a significant margin. 99% of its 6th form students go on to higher education, the vast majority to the university of their first choice.

GDST welcomes opportunities for partnership and enterprise and is confident of its ability to deliver innovation allied to high quality education through its scale of operation, established network of schools and dissemination of best practice.

The views expressed in this document about the Assisted Places Scheme and the Independent Schools' Council's OASIS scheme are those of the Sutton Trust alone.

Summary

- Unlike other European countries Britain has a two-nation education system, in which the state schools are viewed as second best. The state/independent divide has a depressive effect on education as a whole, and its social, economic and cultural impact is deeply damaging. Social mobility in Britain has actually declined in the last thirty years, largely because of the inequality of educational opportunity. One only has to glance at teacher ratios and qualifications in each sector to see the advantage the independents enjoy. Partnerships between the two sectors, 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 most frequently suggested are often impractical. Independent schools cannot be abolished. University entrance quotas would discriminate against talent. 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, of which it has sponsored twenty and is committed to sponsoring four a year. But it does not believe the gap can be overcome by confining Government efforts to the state school 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 and most influential people in 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 Liverpool GDST, funded jointly by the Sutton Trust and the Girls' Day School Trust, the school's owners, has exceeded expectations. With nearly three-quarters of 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 or so top independent day schools would transcend the numbers involved. Because the cost would be shared between parents and the Government, the average cost to the Exchequer would be less than the full cost of a place in the state system. As a first step we are proposing that the Government should open up to 12 schools.

- Open Access would qualify as a public-private partnership, since the schools would offer their resources to all. Objections from Right and Left could be convincingly answered, notably accusations of selection: 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 whose children did not make the grade might initially resort to second-best, less selective independent schools, but they would no longer be buying advantage and their access to the best universities would be diminished. Over time the upper echelons of society would be brought to understand that, educationally speaking, we are all in the same boat.

- Open Access is not a cure-all but a vital new dimension to the Government's strategy. 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.

The Problem

Scarcely a day passes without some reference in the media or Parliament to the problems posed by the uneasy relationship between Britain's state and independent schools. Whether it is examination results, university access, or the hypocrisy of public figures advocating a comprehensive education for other people's children while choosing a privileged one for their own, few subjects arouse such political and private passions. For all this, little or nothing changes. It is almost universally agreed that there is a problem but no one comes up with practical solutions.

Every country has its educational headaches. 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, however able. In terms of facilities, teacher qualifications, staff/pupil ratios and performance the gap is vast. 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 implications for education as a whole. 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. No objective observer can deny that this division undermines efforts at improving standards for all. Yet no political party has any serious policy on the issue.

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/independent 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. About a quarter of the students admitted to

Oxbridge come from the top 100 independent day schools. This means that some 3% of schools provide a quarter of Oxbridge entrants.

Now that the Government is more alive to the problem, there are complaints from independent-sector parents that it is increasingly hard for their children to get into a good university. It would be wrong that a single able, aspiring pupil should be refused a place at university merely because of where he or she went to school. But the same goes for state educated children too, and at present there can be no question about which way the dice are loaded. A slight improvement in a situation in which about half Oxbridge entrants came for years from the 7% of pupils at private school is scarcely evidence of discrimination against the independent sector.

The benefits of a private education in terms of guaranteeing a successful career are greater than decades ago, when grammar and direct grant schools posed a challenge to the independent sector. A study by academics of the London School of Economics and the University of Bristol has shown that social mobility in Britain has actually declined in the last 30 years or so. There are two broad reasons. One is the large growth in income differentials, which means quite simply that there is a bigger gap to jump. But the chief cause has been that the growth of educational opportunities has benefited richer parents disproportionately. The rapid expansion of higher education over the period in question was, for example, concentrated amongst people from higher income backgrounds. "Rather than acting to equalise the chances of people from lower income backgrounds" the study concludes, "the education expansion has actually acted to reinforce and increase inequalities across generations." Statistical and anecdotal evidence on independent schools supports his conclusion. Over the period examined the numbers in independent education have increased, and it is scarcely a secret that privately educated people are over-represented at senior levels in most walks of life, compared to the relatively small number of people who attend independent schools.

The advantages in career-building are clear enough. Senior positions in the legal profession, the judiciary, the City and the upper echelons of the Civil Service are still filled chiefly by those who have been independently educated. And it is not just the more sober professions: it is remarkable how many of the country's successful young actors, comedians, newspaper editors, TV presenters, film stars and even pop stars have

enjoyed the benefits of independent schools. The effects extend to sport: two thirds of the British athletes who won medals at the 2000 Olympics were educated outside the state sphere.

It is a commonplace that an independent education can help instil confidence, sometimes beyond ability, but an intriguing new study by John Goldthorpe of Nuffield College, Oxford, entitled "The Myth of Education-based Meritocracy", has taken this further. At a time when the economy depends more than ever before on so-called "soft skills" – social and communication skills, physical and psychological characteristics or even dress sense and leisure activities – what is learnt in families, communities and peer groups can count as much as formal educational attainment. The social ease, manners, articulacy, persuasiveness and debating skills that can be more prevalent amongst those educated in the independent sector, come into their own. And of course the prevalence of privately schooled students in top universities facilitates networking later on.

In a functioning meritocracy the dominance of Oxbridge and other leading 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 little use saying that the element of privilege is diminished now that the independent sector is more academically selective: that begs the question of who can afford to put their children forward for selection. As Adonis and Pollard noted in their book *A Class Act,* meritocracy works most smoothly amongst the existing elites, for lack of real competition from lower down the scale.

There is no sign of the problem going away; the latest figures on independent school admissions published at the end of last month, showed the ninth successive annual increase in numbers of pupils going to independent schools. If this is the Harry Potter phenomenon, that in itself is a reminder of the pride of place still enjoyed by "the public schools" in our culture. As the effects of a steadily growing private sector work through, we could see an even greater domination of non-state 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 Sutton Trust study has revealed, for example, that Britain's share of Nobel prizes, about 20% till 1980, has fallen to less than 10%. (*Nobel Prizes: The Changing Pattern of Awards,* 2003). Clearly declining university funding is one reason, but failure to exploit all our academic potential is surely another. A nation that will be increasingly obliged to live off its wits cannot afford the exclusivity of the past, or the inverted snobbery to which it gives rise: 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 independent 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 sometimes 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 less simple. The roots of the problem lie deep in our educational and social history, and the existence of the state/independent gulf exerts a depressive effect on state education. This frustrates attempts to equalize performance. A recent *Sunday Times* "shock" headline – "State School Outperforms Harrow" – encapsulated our culture of low expectations. Since over 90% of schools are in the state sector, why should this be a surprise – especially since the state school in question was a single sex, selective grammar?

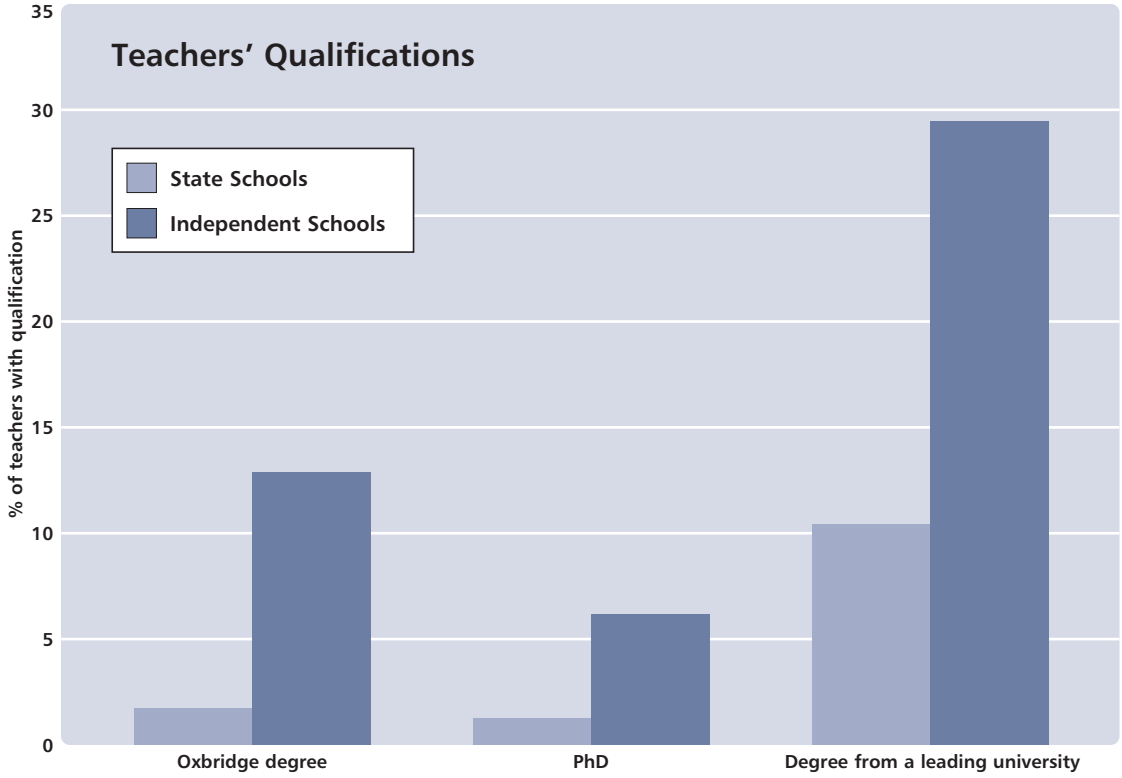
There is bold talk of making our state schools world class; some claim that we are getting there, though the statistics are open to dispute. Yet it seems self-evident that Britain can never develop a high quality state education system whilst the most powerful in society have no direct interest in it. The state/independent divide in education, it could be argued, 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 mis-perception, 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 forms a small

proportion now of the total in independent schools and opening them up would not be cost effective) the resources are far greater than those in the state sector (£7,000 per pupil as against £4,300[2]). The 2003 ISC census revealed a staff/pupil ratio of 1:10.3, compared with the DfES's figures 1:17 in secondary schools, and 17.9 in all state schools. About 13% of teachers are in the independent sector, which takes 7% of pupils.

And it is not just teacher numbers: quality matters, and here too private schools enjoy a great advantage. A study commissioned by the Sutton Trust (*Teacher Qualifications,* by Alan Smithers and Louise Tracey of the Centre for Education and Employment Research, Liverpool University) reveals that teachers in independent schools are seven times more likely to have graduated from Oxbridge, and five times more likely to have a PhD.

More pertinently, perhaps, teachers in the independent sector are far more likely to have a degree in the subject they are teaching, especially in shortage subjects such as maths, physics, design



[2] Much depends on whether LEA overheads, capital finance and central government costs are included. Gordon Brown's Spending Review in July 2002 added capital spend to recurrent spend.

and technology. Only in physical education do state schools do better. We should not blame the private sector for recruiting the best it can get. Yet students in state schools are being short-changed by not having access to the most highly qualified teachers. Is it right that the children of the wealthiest 7% of society should be alone in benefiting from their services?

In addition the intake to independent schools is of course academically and socially selective, the ethos is un-ashamedly competitive and academic aspirations are higher. The result is some dismal statistics:

- Although only 7% of the population attend independent schools, according to *The Times* 2003 tables, 85 of the top hundred schools (in terms of examination results) are independent, and of the 15 state schools only one is a comprehensive.
- Of the top 200 schools, 164 were independent, and only 27 state schools (of which only five were comprehensives);
- 92% of independent school pupils go on to higher education, as opposed to 35% in the state sector.

A new independent report[3] concludes that in England the achievement gap between independent and maintained schools is higher than anywhere in the world. Suggestions that the gap in performance is narrowing would be heartening if they could be sustained, but the signs are not encouraging. By extrapolating on past figures, a study by the Sutton Trust suggested that by 2007, as in the recent past, the percentage of pupils attaining 20 or 30 points at A-level in the independent sector would still be almost double that in state schools.

Nor can we take comfort from suggestions that, though the Assisted Places Scheme has been abolished, scholarship boys and girls form an increasing percentage of independent pupils: 32% is the figure claimed by the independent sector. But only 23% comprises scholarships or bursaries from the schools themselves (the rest comes from local authorities, residual APS pupils, etc.) and most of that financial help goes to the moneyed parents of clever children, relatively well-off parents who have fallen on hard times, and the schools' own teachers, whose fees are heavily subsidised. The notion

[3] *England's Education: What Can Be Learned by Comparing Countries?,* by Professor Alan Smithers of the Centre for Education and Employment Research, University of Liverpool, May 2004.

that almost a third of independent school pupils are composed of the worthy poor is seriously misleading. The fact is that, in practical terms, independent schools have become exclusive.

The Assisted Places Scheme was a limited, much abused and conceptually flawed system, and it was right to abolish it. What is certain is that, now that the APS 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. Yet while these collaborative activities are successful as far as they go, it would be wrong to exaggerate their impact overall. Such schemes do something to blur the divide, but they cannot be seen as a solution.

Quite apart from the damage to education, the state/private divide is the cause of pernicious social attitudes, be they envy, hypocrisy, snobbery or condescension. Instead of closing our eyes to it, or seeking ways of mitigating its effects at the margin, it is time we faced up to the issue squarely, and in a constructive way.

Proposed Solutions

The purpose of this paper is not to rehearse familiar issues, but to put forward realistic answers. It is fashionable to deplore 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 proposals on how to tackle 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. No able child should be denied a place because of their social or educational background. 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**
  It is reasonable to ask, as the Government has begun doing, how charitable the average independent school is in practice? Yet to impose VAT on independent schools would be a breach of European Law, which prohibits VAT on education expenditures. 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. 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 currently are.

- **abolishing selection**
  In his pamphlet *A Level Playing Field* Harry Brighouse, Professor at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, 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. The same applies to the suggestion of Adam Swift, Fellow in Politics and Sociology at Balliol College Oxford, in his book *How Not To Be a Hypocrite,* that pupils at independent schools be chosen by lottery.

- **vouchers**

  Vouchers, long on the drawing board, now appear to be Conservative Party policy. Pauline Davies, Head of Wycombe Abbey School, has said that parents should be allowed to use the equivalent of state spending on their children in the form of a voucher to buy them an independent education. In theory the idea seems equitable, and a way to widen choice, but we start from where we are. With vouchers the pool of parents willing to pay would expand greatly, and new independent schools would be created to cater for demand. As perhaps a million more parents fled the state system, its prestige would plummet further. Certainly flat-rate vouchers would increase choice – for those who could find the £3,000 or so to top up the voucher. An expansion of the independent sector would merely consolidate the two-tier system, while doing nothing to open up independent education to the less privileged. And there would be even less incentive for the upper levels of society to take an interest in the performance of the state sector. Financially an indiscriminate scheme would be unaffordable, and unless the parents fleeing the state system were geographically balanced there would be no chance of off-setting this cost by closing whole state schools.

Other 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 proposed by the Independent Schools Council, suggests that the independent sector should offer a few of what it calls "open access" places to pupils at a number of 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 only a small 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** has been put forward by Anthony Seldon, Headmaster of Brighton College, who advocates in a pamphlet 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 no government would be likely to consider such a step.

Surveying the ideas on offer, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that few of them are workable proposals. Furthermore 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.

Government Policy

On independent schools, the Government has developed a twin strategy. On one hand it holds to the hope that reforms in the maintained sector will gradually bridge the gap in achievement. On the other, having begun by adopting a non-threatening attitude to the independent sector in 1997, increasingly it is bringing various pressures to bear, notably in university admission and in insisting on co-operation between the state and private sectors. 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 has sponsored and is continuing to sponsor 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. We also broadly support co-operative schemes between state and independent schools, however one-sided they turn out in practice. Yet we remain sceptical as to the adequacy of these measures in breaking down the great divide.

Having improved standards in primary schools, the Government intends to concentrate on secondaries. This makes excellent sense, but the problems here are more entrenched and, unlike primary schools, will often involve structural change. Meanwhile there is evidence that even primary improvements, both in numeracy and literacy, are stalling. Even if reforms at secondary level go smoothly it could take massive resources and decades for 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, notably London.

There is certainly no sign of any impending exodus from independent schools. The latest Independent School Council (ISC) census showed that 2004 saw the ninth consecutive annual rise in pupils in independent schools: in London, where there is both greater wealth and more dissatisfaction with state schools, the proportion has reached

14% – twice the national average. Heightened ambitions for girls have played a significant part in this gradual expansion. The proportion of girls in independent schools has increased every year since the ISC census began, in 1982, when it was 41.7% of the total. Now it is 48.7%, and still growing.

According to a survey conducted by MORI for the Independent School Information Service (ISIS), a significant majority of the electorate, including a majority of Labour voters, would send their children to independents if they could afford to do so. And although fees are rising at more than double the rate of inflation, incomes have been rising too, especially at higher levels, along with property values.

Why do parents continue to pay out such enormous sums for schooling? One can never exclude the element of snobbery in independent education, but the motives of most fee-paying parents are increasingly utilitarian. They are investing in their children's prospects. According to the OECD PISA study, *Literacy Skills in the World of Tomorrow,* British independent schools are the best in the world. Studies carried out by the Institute of Education and the LSE on the benefits of independent education suggest that it adds up to a 1 grade per A-level advantage, as well as the "soft skills" advantage discussed above. 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 policy.

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 sending 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 independent education could well increase or at least remain static even if the performance of state secondary schools improves, as the country becomes richer, disposable income increases, and independent schools sell themselves more aggressively.

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, and their delivery. The growing tendency for parents 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 7% of society will be limited by the fact that they have no personal stake in the outcome. They may make the conventional noises of concern, but that concern is unlikely to run deep. After all, 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 could 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. A large question mark must therefore remain over prospects for the dramatic leap necessary to bring state school results within hailing distance of the independents. In particular the difficulty of recruiting high quality teachers, which the private sector suffers from to a lesser extent, seems likely to act as a brake on the performance of comprehensives, specialised or not.

Increased government spending – the school budget is due to leap from £29 billion in 1997 to £49 billion in 2005 – should give a steady boost to maintained schools. Early indications suggest that much of it will be eaten up in pay and pensions – a plus if the result is to attract better staff, but that cannot be guaranteed. And while the Sutton Trust is much in favour of improved staff/pupil ratios, we recognise that competing priorities will always tend to limit the state sector's ability to compete in this regard. And of course individual parents will always be prepared to buy educational advantage for their children.

Nor will attempts to introduce more choice in the state sector necessarily benefit those at the bottom of the social scale. An analysis we conducted of the top 200 performing state schools revealed that their free school meals entitlement averages 3% compared to the national average of 17%. One might have expected a discrepancy, though not one that large. It is not just poverty of expectation: apparently mundane factors like the non-availability of school bussing can be a serious barrier. A study by the Boston Consulting Group carried out for the Sutton Trust (*Travelling to School,* 2003) showed that whilst the better-off were well placed to take advantage of more variegated schools, and to drive

their children to them, the least well-off tended to stay put.

There is a more fundamental issue that could work against any narrowing of the state/private gap. 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.

If competition from the state sector is stepped up the independent sector will be sufficiently flexible and imaginative to match it. The fact that the independent sector put on a conference not long ago entitled "How to stay ahead of the state sector" suggests that they are fully alert to their task. 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 to pay for ever-improving modern facilities, e.g. in science and technology, to continue to improve staff/pupil ratios, and to recruit and retain the best teachers.

As the Sutton Trust study on Teacher Qualifications suggested, being a private sector employer, the independent sector can be relied upon to ensure that it attracts the best teachers on the market. It is illusory to talk of fruitful exchange between public and private: according to the ISC, three times as many teachers move from the state to the independent sector as in the opposite direction.

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.

Intimations 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, is another cloud on the horizon. Though it is unclear how far this will develop, a two-tier system of examinations, one largely confined to fee-paying schools and the other for the rest, would dramatically reinforce the divide.

In buying independent education parents are in effect buying privileged access to leading universities. 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 to apply for the places they deserve at our top universities.

The Sutton Trust has been involved in the field of improving access for 6 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 state school pupils are not receiving their share of the places justified by their A-level results. The latest Government initiatives could do something to remedy this.

The debate over top-up fees has once again focussed attention on the success of independent schools in securing places at top universities, and the need to ensure admittance for bright students from state schools. A balanced approach would do everything to ensure that independent school pupils do not get preference over state pupils with equivalent examination results, and that the potential of able but impecunious pupils from below average schools is recognised. But in our zeal for social justice it will be important not to skew the system in the opposite direction.

If the government hopes that, fearful that attendance at independent schools will prove a disadvantage in the future, well-off parents will be increasingly likely to chose the state sector, this is to be regretted. Such a policy seems fraught with danger, since it implies that students will be selected by social rather than educational criteria. Discriminating against highly qualified students who, through no fault of their own, happen to have been privately educated, would be against natural justice, as well as posing a threat to university standards.

The key to a sensible policy on access is the recognition that, as many vice-chancellors have argued, though there is much to do in opening the doors of higher education wider, the root problem lies in the under-achievement of many state schools. While the gulf in average examination performance remains as wide as it is, the imbalance in admissions to the most prestigious institutions is destined to continue, albeit at a somewhat lower level.

Important and fruitful as the work of encouraging talented comprehensive pupils to apply may be, and of encouraging universities to accept them, we should never lose sight of the fact that these are artificial procedures, frequently arising from the malign effects of the state/private divide. Remedial measures of this kind are currently necessary, but to institutionalise them can imply a renunciation of any hope of resolving the basic issue.

No government is in power forever, and under a different administration it may be that pressures on universities to recruit more students from state schools will be relaxed. One way and another, for all the new uncertainties faced by private school parents, for the foreseeable future those 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. Of course there is much to be done at lower levels. Yet 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 a 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 eleven-plus. 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 less privileged 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 GDST, we would

estimate that pupils needing some level of funding would be approximately two-thirds of the cohort. 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 £7,000 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 some £200 million, when the scheme is fully operational.

- 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. On the basis that state places work out at around £4,300 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 resources in the state sector.

- It is important to underline what this means in terms of selling the idea to politicians and the public. The cost of each place would in effect be shared between the school, paying parents and the Government. As a result of this partnership the average net price to the Treasury for each child attending a distinguished, well-equipped independent school would be £3,500 – less than a state school place. It is hard therefore to see how there could be any public objection to the scheme on financial grounds.

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 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.[4] There was no means test so that many of those who paid no fees at all came from families 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 that could afford it would pay.

The differences between open access and the APS are even more fundamental. Those selected under the APS scheme were not 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, such as the value of 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. In fact, in a sense it could all be said to have cemented this divide, by granting a limited number of places (in 1985 they amounted to a mere 13% of

[4] 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.

the total at independent schools, much less than the direct grant schools) from within a closed system, and by its top-down ethos.

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. There can be no comparison between an exclusive institution awarding a minority of places to needy pupils, and one that is open to all.

The Belvedere Pilot

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 GDST, 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 25 member schools which 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 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. Since Open Access was introduced the figure is in the region of 70%, under stricter means test arrangements. The social mix we have so far achieved has been greater than we hoped for. The school is one of the 25 secondary schools of the GDST, all of which appear regularly in the top 3 of their league tables. Parental occupations span the whole socio-economic range.

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. In the first 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.

As an important part of the pilot an outreach officer was appointed, working from the school to visit state 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 have been introduced in addition to English and mathematics papers set by the school. An admissions committee consisting of 3 people decides offers based on merit.

An annual independent assessment of the school's operation has been carried out by Professor Alan Smithers and Dr Pamela Robinson of the Centre of Education and Employment Research at the University of Liverpool. The question they 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? They identified some problems, but concluded that "even in its first year the scheme can be counted a success."

Their report for the third year[5] concludes that the Open Access Scheme is "bedding down in a changing environment" (a reference to increased competition from Liverpool's Blue Coat School, a long established boys' grammar school that has recently become co-educational). Applications were received from 129 state schools, which provided 92% of the year's intake.

Over 30% of those for whom the father's occupational status was available came from manual backgrounds, or were unemployed. 29 very able girls from the 111 applicants from the two poorest postcode categories were offered places, as were 6 of the 15 applicants from the multi-racial inner city.

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

[5] *Evaluation of the Open Access Scheme at The Belvedere School, GDST* by Alan Smithers and Pamela Robinson.(2003)

Trend in Acceptances by Number of Schools

School Type	1999	2000	2001	2002
Maintained	32	42	44	44
Independent	2	2	1	3
Belvedere	1	1	1	1
Other (from Outside Region)	0	0	0	1

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. At maturity the scheme will cost about £2 million annually.

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 increasingly 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 Proposal to Government

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 or so of the best performing independent day schools. It may be however that the Government's judgement is that it would be difficult to implement the full scheme in one go. It may also be felt that, despite our arguments to the contrary, £200 million 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 7 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.

There would be no risk of the Government suffering 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 an outreach officer and effective local publicity. If it were to happen the parents would pay fees as before, so nothing would be lost. Equally unlikely is a scenario where an overwhelming majority of entrants came from the poorest backgrounds, causing costs to the Government to spiral. To that extent what we are proposing, economically speaking, is a failsafe system. On the more reasonable assumption that the pilot scheme was seen to work, within acceptable financial parameters, 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.

Extensive soundings by the Sutton Trust have revealed a high level of interest amongst a wide variety of schools all over the country in its ideas. Following the initial publication of our proposal, backing has been forthcoming from a number of figures in the educational world.

- Graham Able, Master of Dulwich College and former Chairman of the Headmasters' Conference, said:
  "I would be excited by the inclusion of Dulwich College in either the full or pilot project."

- Roger Dancey, Chief Master of King Edward's School, Birmingham, said:
  "The pilot scheme at the Belvedere School Liverpool has clearly been a tremendous success in widening access. If the Government is serious about widening access to the top universities then the most direct way to achieve that aim is surely to widen access to leading independent day schools. The Governing Body at King Edward's has always sought open access as its goal, and would be delighted to receive an invitation to join the scheme."

- Tony Evans, Head Master of King's College Wimbledon, and a former Chairman of the Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference, said:
  "It is a cause of deep regret to me, to this school and to many heads of similar establishments, that the ablest pupils in the community who are unable to pay should be excluded. Despite all the efforts which we in the independent sector are genuinely making, I do not believe that the situation can be reversed until there is an initiative of the kind you propose which is fully supported and funded by the Government. With established guarantees over the ethos of a school such as this, I would welcome an extension of the scheme you propose and I give it my unreserved support. I do not believe that the United Kingdom can serve its citizens unless a process of open access is established and I congratulate you on your determination and support the principles fully."

- Mr David Levin, Headmaster of the City of London School, said:
  "I will be recommending to my Board of Governors that if it were possible to finance an open access admission system at the school we should do so. I am fairly certain that the members of my Governing Body and the officers of the City of London Corporation would be sympathetic... I would like entry to this school to be selected on the basis of merit and merit alone."

- Mrs Gill Richards, Headmistress of the Belvedere School, said:
  "The Open Access Scheme has proved very successful in attracting academically able girls to Belvedere who would not otherwise have been able to take advantage of the quality and breadth of the education offered here."

- Dr Martin Stephen, High Master of Manchester Grammar School and Chairman of the Headmasters' Conference, said:
  "We are committed to needs blind entry. We have supported Peter Lampl and the Sutton Trust from the start. We would have no hesitation in becoming part of an open access scheme."

Presentation

There is every reason to believe that the opening of hitherto exclusive establishments to all the talents would be as welcome to the national public as the new scheme at Belvedere School GDST 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 effect would be to break down barriers, and militate against the old ethos of snobbery, divisiveness and exclusion.

Co-operation in the independent sector of education could be presented as an extension of the Public/Private Partnership (PPP) principle to an area which needs it most, and where it is less likely to be contested than for example in transport or the NHS. The MORI poll for the Independent Schools Information Service (ISIS) 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. Unlike City Academies however, which require huge initial capital investment by the state, open access needs none.

Public acceptance would be increased if open access could be presented as a joint initiative to which the independent 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 legitimately 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, and their retention of charitable status. Open Access schools would have no difficulty in arguing "public benefit."

Popular support would not prevent the scheme from coming under fire from Right and Left, but attacks by both 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 independent schools, should there be a demand.

- **Why abolish the APS only to put something similar in its place?**
  Answer: This question has been largely dealt with above. 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: 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 eleven-plus, there would be much less question of leaving their former classmates with a sense of failure. This is not a return to a selective system of education. The pilot project at Belvedere has evoked very little resentment in local schools. Generally then effect will be insignificant, but the benefit should be to create healthy competition and the raising of aspirations.

- **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 already being spent on the state system, in sums which dwarf what we are proposing. In discussions of affordability the key point however is that the cost to the state would be less than a state school place. 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. 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 selective system and what we have in mind.

- **It would make no difference to the state/private divide. The well-off parents of children who failed to get in would simply place them in other independent schools.**

  Answer: That might well be their response. Parents would be at liberty to spend large sums on sending their children to second-rate independents if they wanted. But it would no longer in effect buy their children places at the best universities, or give them a leg up in their future careers, or prevent the most able children from having access to the best education. There is all the difference in the world between a system where the best schools are in effect reserved for the moneyed classes, and one where no amount of money will buy a place there.

- **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 forth-coming. Objectors are in effect arguing that the best policy is to do nothing.

Educational and Social Impact

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 state school 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.

Bringing independent schools into the equation for everyone could be salutary from many points of view. If good schools in the independent sector, open to all, could be no longer relied on as an opt-out for the middle classes, they might become rather more aware of the educational condition of the country as a whole, and, over time, incline towards a one-nation educational culture.

For the first time in decades independent 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 be rather like universities, which select their intake but where opportunities are open to all. As such there would be less reason for them to be envied or resented.

Like good universities the schools would be over-subscribed, and selection would be based on potential to derive benefit from what is on offer. There is a strange anomaly in our national attitude to this whole matter. In the context of the debate about top-up fees there is great indignation at the idea that some of our best universities might be financially out of reach of talented pupils, and dire warnings are issued about a two-tier higher educational system. Yet we accept without question a system of secondary education in which

many of the best schools in the country are closed to many of our brightest pupils on grounds of cost.

Another eventual benefit would be in recruitment to leading universities. As a Sutton Trust report has 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 until 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 a 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.

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. In the light of the failure of both Right and Left to tackle the great divide energetically, for all the lip-service paid to meritocracy, it is permitted to wonder how far they are genuinely convinced of its desirability in education.

Parts of the Left increasingly create the impression that they prefer equality to meritocracy, while the Right appears in no hurry to open a closed system to all the talents, in a way that might challenge the educational ascendancy of its natural supporters. 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 policy would be to perpetuate the 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 independently 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.

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 effects of open access on 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 of students 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 – 12x48 – who failed to gain admittance to their preferred independent 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. Though

in this context it is noteworthy that both *The Times* and *The Daily Telegraph* have voiced support for the principles of the open access scheme. In doing so, we believe that they reflect the likely sentiments of the majority. For the country as a whole understands perfectly well that an apartheid mentality in education casts a pall over the whole system.

Conclusion

It is for the Government to decide its educational strategy. But the Sutton Trust is convinced that open access would represent a constructive alternative to 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 are in line with our best traditions of evolution rather than abrupt change, or no change at all. They would do much to break the log-jam over state and independent education that has for too long dammed up our educational potential, and help to release the talents of the entire country.

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