

**Local authorities and comprehensivization in England and Wales, 1944-1974**

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## INTRODUCTION

During the 1960s and 1970s the *Times Educational Supplement (TES)* and *Education* carried detailed reports on a weekly basis about local policy plans, decisions and reactions to comprehensive education proposals. In one important sense the social, economic, demographic and school-specific variables in any given local education authority (LEA) were unique, but at a general level the arguments became familiar. Quotes from those involved in the recent parental campaign to decide the future of Ripon Grammar School reveal the endurance of these arguments, even if Web sites have replaced placards and marches. Supporters of comprehensive education continue to argue that eleven-plus selection procedures are unreliable, take no account of late developers and condemn the majority of children to schools which are, in comparison to the grammars, unsatisfactory. But any future decisions to be taken about England's 164 remaining grammar schools rest exclusively with parents, while secondary schools themselves now have opportunities, if they wish to pursue them, of developing a specialist (and selective) character. Having entered the twenty-first century only after re-inventing themselves as competitive service-providers, LEAs have lost many of their former powers and much of their influence over secondary education. This article recalls (mostly) happier times for LEAs, focusing upon the drive for comprehensive education in the years 1944 to 1974.

The term 'comprehensive' evolved during the Second World War as a replacement for the 'multilateral' school, an 'all through' institution for children aged 11 to 18, ideally purpose built on a single site. More specific early definitions were uncommon, although most commentators agreed that comprehensive schools needed to be large in order to sustain viable sixth forms. A 1947 circular from the Ministry of Education recommended, for example, that the minimum size of a comprehensive school should be 10- or 11-form entry so that it would accommodate in excess of 1,500 children (Kerckhoff et al, 1996, p. 61). This understanding of comprehensive education was to be substantially revised over the next 30 years, mostly as a direct consequence of LEA, rather than central government, initiatives.

The remainder of this paper, which draws upon research sponsored by the Spencer Foundation [1], is divided into five sections. The next two sections are chronological and survey non-selective developments at the local level over the full 30-year period.

Attention is then drawn to key personnel involved in LEA reorganizations, including the Chief Education Officer (CEO) and chair of the Education Committee. This is followed by a brief discussion of local consultation and reorganization issues and, finally, a concluding section.

#### ALTERNATIVES TO BIPARTISM, TRIPARTISM AND THE ELEVEN-PLUS, 1944-62

One common misconception, even among some historians, is that the 1944 Education Act endorsed tripartite secondary schooling. In fact, the Act itself had nothing to say about how secondary schools should be organized. This was a matter that was left for the LEAs to decide and report to the Ministry of Education in a development plan. But subsequent Ministry guidance to LEAs barely acknowledged the possibility that an LEA might wish to establish comprehensive schools throughout its administrative area. Such schools were thought to be possibly appropriate in sparsely-populated areas or as ‘judicious experiments’ (Ministry of Education, 1945; Ministry of Education, 1947), but they were not encouraged.

When the development plans started rolling in, the Ministry had reason to be surprised. A 1947 survey of 54 LEA plans revealed that more than half were seeking to establish at least one non-selective school (Simon, 1991, p. 75). The Labour-controlled London County Council (LCC) submitted the most ambitious and detailed scheme. The *London School Plan* envisaged a total of 103 ‘comprehensive school units’, comprising 67 comprehensive schools and a further 36 ‘county complements’ linked to existing grammar schools (LCC, 1947). Early support for comprehensives was not purely an urban, socialist phenomenon. In a predominantly rural area of Yorkshire, for example, the Conservative-controlled West Riding LEA also initially favoured a fully comprehensive secondary school system (Clegg, 1965, p. 75).

Guided by the schools inspectorate, Ellen Wilkinson (1945-47) and George Tomlinson (1947-51), the Education ministers in Attlee’s Labour government, proceeded very cautiously. In rural areas the Ministry accepted the arguments for comprehensive schools, albeit for reasons that had more to do with economics than with education. This policy permitted the West Riding to open two 11-18 comprehensive schools during the early 1950s, while Anglesey was permitted to go

fully comprehensive as a special case. Elsewhere, the Ministry sanctioned limited experiments in urban LEAs where wartime bomb damage had spawned new housing developments, including Bristol, Coventry, Leeds and London. Plans for comprehensive schools advanced by Middlesex and the North Riding of Yorkshire were rejected, however (Simon, 1991, pp. 104-9).

Eight 'interim' split-site London comprehensive schools, housed in the premises of former senior and central school buildings had been established by the end of 1949. Important as these schools proved to be as trail-blazers (see LCC, 1961, p. 14), they offered little prospect of tempting middle-class parents to abandon existing grammar schools. The authority's ambitions, which continued to be invested in the creation of new schools to *replace* selective schools, received a boost in the autumn of 1949. Tomlinson's approval of a proposal to close five schools, including Eltham Grammar School for Girls, permitted the LCC to build its first purpose-built comprehensive, Kidbrooke School, designed to accommodate 2,000 girls aged 11-18. The Conservative general election victory of 1951 did not immediately seem to threaten these plans, but in October 1953 Florence Horsbrugh, Churchill's Minister of Education, took the extraordinary step of urging a London Conservative Women's Conference to organize protests against the closure of existing schools (Simon, 1991, pp. 171-72). The *TES*, edited by the fiercely anti-comprehensive Walter James, offered immediate support for the preservation of Eltham Grammar School and in March 1954, just six months before Kidbrooke was due to enrol its first pupils, Horsbrugh announced that it would stay open. Though not at this time a supporter of comprehensive education, the Secretary of the Association of Education Committees (AEC), Sir William Alexander, was outraged by the Minister's actions. He feared that the decision might establish a precedent for 'destroying the autonomy of Local Education Authorities in determining the appropriate use of school accommodation in their area and the best plan for the organisation of secondary education' (*Education* editorial, 12 March 1954).

Sir David Eccles, Horsbrugh's successor, pursued a more even-handed policy, allowing the establishment of new comprehensives and county complements in both purpose-built accommodation and amalgamated premises. Holloway, Mayfield, Parliament Hill, Sydenham and Wandsworth, all former grammar schools, became

showpiece LCC comprehensives during the mid-fifties. While the eleven-plus continued to operate in London, however, middle-class parents were able to deny these schools a fully comprehensive intake. It was the same story in two other cities where wartime bomb damage facilitated progress. Bristol LEA established some 14 non-selective secondary schools between 1954 and 1963, but they served working-class housing estates and, even in the locality, they were rarely described as ‘comprehensives’ (Keen, 1965, p. 23). Coventry’s first eight comprehensives were also established without closing any city grammar schools and, as in Bristol, the LEA continued to purchase places in local direct grant schools throughout this period (Chinn, 1965, p. 27). A number of other LEAs managed to establish one or more comprehensive schools in the 1950s, but some held out against this strategy of tokenism. In 1965 Stoke-on-Trent’s CEO, Henry Dibden, recalled that

. . . the clamour to build one comprehensive school as an experiment had to be countered by the argument that if you are going comprehensive you should go completely or not at all; that by its very nature the comprehensive will not harmonize with other forms. That if you had one, then throughout the City the 11 plus would continue to operate and you could not exclude children in the comprehensive neighbourhood. Some of the grammar type parents would opt for grammar school places. If they were refused and told they must all go to the comprehensive, the Minister of Education would over-rule the Committee as interfering with parents’ choice.

(Dibden, 1965, pp. 67-68)

The West Riding of Yorkshire pursued a very pragmatic approach after the Second World War. With too few suitable sites available to implement an authority-wide system of comprehensives the authority settled for a policy of bipartism, rather than tripartism (except in the districts served by the two comprehensives). But continuing unhappiness with the eleven-plus saw the West Riding introduce what became known as the ‘Thorne scheme’ from the mid-1950s. This was a means of allocating grammar school places to the ablest primary school children on the basis of teachers’ recommendations. This scheme, which was judged to be no less reliable than a formal

examination, was operational in two-thirds of the county by 1964 and was copied by a number of like-minded LEAs (Gosden and Sharp, 1978, pp. 178-79).

With mounting evidence that both the rationale for and methods of psychometric testing were flawed (for example Vernon, 1957; Yates and Pidgeon, 1957) interest developed 'in the possibility of beating, at one stroke, both of the bogys which had hitherto seemed to create an "either/or" situation: selection at 11 and giant comprehensives' (Pedley, 1980, p. 458). One proposal, first advanced unsuccessfully by Croydon LEA officials in 1954, was a two-tier system involving 11-15 comprehensive schools followed by the possibility - for those pupils who successfully sat GCE 'O' levels at age 16 - of transferring to a 'junior college' or sixth form college. Leicestershire's Director of Education, Stewart Mason, advanced an alternative two-tier solution, the result, he later claimed, of a 'blinding explosion' of inspiration that came to him whilst shaving one morning early in 1957 (*Guardian*, 12 September 1978; Jones, 1988, p. 57). This proposal was that the county's secondary modern schools, re-named 'junior high schools', should recruit all the pupils from the primary schools within their catchment area. Pupils would remain at the junior high school for a minimum of three years before either transferring to a grammar school (or 'senior high') or continuing for a further year at their present school. Mason's 'blinding explosion' was hardly an original thought, however. Robin Pedley, at that time a Leicester University lecturer, had articulated the same idea in student seminars and at a meeting with Eccles at least one year earlier. Pedley, rather than Mason, was the true architect of the Leicestershire 'experiment' and 'plan' (Crook, 1992).

The preservation, albeit with some re-orientation, of the grammar schools was a feature of the Leicestershire plan that appealed to a succession of Conservative Education ministers. The county's 'experiment', which had been launched with amazing speed in two districts in September 1957, was immediately declared a success, both within the county and the country. The initiative was welcomed in a 1958 White Paper on secondary education, but proposals 'to bring to an end an existing grammar school' were said to be 'quite another matter'. 'It cannot be right', the White Paper asserted, 'that good existing schools should be forcibly brought to an end, or that parents' freedom of choice should be so completely abolished' (Ministry of Education, 1958, pp. 5-6). Thereafter, the Ministry continued to permit

comprehensive experiments, but looked still more favourably upon the extension of opportunities for secondary modern pupils to take public examinations. This policy was hardly a ringing endorsement of eleven-plus selection and, in all probability, it encouraged more LEAs to contemplate the possibilities of comprehensive schools. As the curriculum of the secondary modern school began to imitate that of the grammar school the rationale for segregation became less clear and calls for a fully comprehensive system grew louder.

#### LEA COMPREHENSIVE SCHEMES, 1963-74

As Brian Simon has argued, the experiments of the 1950s provided the background to the 'breakout' of the following decade (Simon, 1991, pp. 203-11). The local elections of May 1963 brought sweeping victories for Labour and provided a vital catalyst for the comprehensive movement. Bristol, Liverpool and Manchester LEAs quickly produced city-wide schemes for comprehensive reorganization, while the LCC finally abandoned the eleven-plus, replacing it in those districts where grammar schools continued to operate by a combination of teacher assessment and parental choice (*TES*, 28 February 1964). A number of rural counties, including Devon, Dorset and Shropshire, none of them Labour-controlled, also declared themselves in favour of comprehensives (Miles, 1964). A grass-roots movement was underway that demanded some revisionist thinking from a Conservative government that seemed destined for defeat at the next general election. Macmillan's Minister of Education, Edward Boyle, had quietly been encouraging LEAs to look at possibilities for softening selection procedures and was much more open-minded about comprehensive education than the majority of his parliamentary colleagues. In a private briefing paper of July 1963, headed 'Prime Minister', he recommended that the Conservative Party should go beyond the doctrine of the 1958 White Paper and 'make an end of the strict neutrality which my Department has maintained in public towards local selection methods'[2].

The following month saw Boyle appoint a committee chaired by Lady Bridget Plowden 'to consider primary education in all its aspects, *and the transition to secondary education*' (DES, 1967, p. iii, author's emphasis). A widespread expectation that the Plowden committee would contest whether eleven, the age stipulated by the 1944 Education Act, was the best age of transfer to secondary education produced new thinking in the localities about the possibilities of tiered

secondary systems that would either delay selection or abolish it altogether. In the West Riding, Alec Clegg, the CEO, concluded that a three-tier secondary system, using existing school premises, offered the only realistic prospect of satisfying demands for comprehensive education from several divisional executives. A preliminary meeting with Ministry of Education officials did not raise expectations that the age of transfer could be waived, but the authority pressed ahead with a proposal to create 5-9, 9-13 and 13-18 schools in several of its districts (*TES*, 11 October 1963). The scheme fitted well with Boyle's interest in developing comprehensive education without closing grammar schools and an Education Bill was quickly enacted so that the West Riding could reorganize along these lines. Other LEAs watched with interest. In West Sussex, for example, County Hall officials quickly noted that three-tier schooling would provide one solution to a logistical school buildings problem in a rural district. The prospect of introducing comprehensive education without the perceived disadvantages of huge 11-18 schools was an important, but secondary consideration (Kerckhoff et al, 1996, p. 141).

Labour's 1964 general election victory saw Michael Stewart become Secretary of State for Education in Harold Wilson's cabinet. He quickly produced a briefing document in which he argued that the transition to a predominantly comprehensive system could be achieved within five years, a vision that was certainly neither shared by Chief Inspector Percy Wilson nor by a number of senior Civil Servants at the DES (Dean, 1998, p. 71; Lawrence, 1993, p. 46). Stewart's suggestion that a circular should be sent to each of the English and Welsh LEAs was accepted, but the cabinet stopped short of sanctioning legislation at this point (Stewart, 1980, p. 132). Circular 10/65, published on 14 July 1965 by Stewart's successor, Anthony Crosland, *requested*, but did not require LEAs to submit plans to the Ministry (DES, 1965).

Six alternative methods of 'going comprehensive' were set out in Circular 10/65. LEAs were free to decide, on the basis of educational preference and existing building stock, whether an all-through solution – the favoured option of Crosland – was appropriate, or whether they wished to introduce a tiered system. Of the two-tier alternatives, each contemplated secondary education beginning at 11 but with transfer to another school (or sixth form college) at the ages of 13, 14 or 16. Three-tier comprehensive options, to include middle schools for children aged 8-12 –



prefiguring the Plowden preference - and 9-13 were also outlined, signalling the satisfaction of the DES with the West Riding pilot.

Most of the large, Labour-controlled urban authorities, including Leeds and Birmingham, shared the preference of Bristol, Liverpool, London and Manchester for all-through comprehensives. But in each of these cities rapid progress was hampered by inadequate building stock, the need to consult with church authorities and uncertainties about future LEA relations with local direct grant schools. Long-term plans were often explicit, but the absence of additional DES funding to implement reorganization meant that ideals had to be temporarily sacrificed. Compromises invariably took the form of 'interim' arrangements, the phased abolition of the eleven-plus and school amalgamations that created comprehensive schools on two or more sites.

The Leicestershire experiment and plan provided a concrete example of the two-tier model involving pupil transfer at 14. The similar proposal for transfer at 13 was widely referred to as the 'Doncaster' plan, a reference to a scheme that had – somewhat surprisingly – been accepted by the DES two months before Crosland's circular was issued (*TES*, 21 May 1965). Both schemes, in their original form, were only semi-comprehensive, delaying selection and permitting upper-tier secondary schools to retain the name 'grammar school' if it was so desired. They involved guided parental choice at the age of transfer, prompting objections that the grammar schools (or 'senior highs') would continue to be populated by middle-class pupils and that girls would suffer a relative disadvantage. The most enthusiastic pro-comprehensive authorities tended to shun these options, except as interim solutions. Middle school possibilities, meanwhile, aroused interest, but uncertainty about the ideal age of transfer from the lower and middle tiers strengthened the view that LEAs should 'wait for Plowden'.

A small number of Conservative LEAs indicated from the beginning that they would defy the circular (Crook, 1993, pp. 53-54), but rather more took the view that paying half-hearted attention to the Doncaster or Leicestershire model might enable them to meet Crosland's demands in a fashion that involved minimal change. For example, Buckinghamshire County Council pledged its support for comprehensives 'provided

that any comprehensive school does not prejudice the continuance of any existing selective secondary school' [3]. Richmond-upon-Thames, meanwhile, produced a draft plan that merely involved the enlargement and improvement of its secondary modern schools which were to be re-named 'comprehensives', while gradually reducing grammar school intakes to 20 per cent [4]. The Campaign for the Advancement of State Education (CASE) took it upon itself to expose LEAs that were 'finding ways of defeating the intention of reorganisation by continuing selection in various forms or by schemes which they know cannot be implemented for many years' [5].

As Shadow Secretary of State for Education between 1964 and 1969 Edward Boyle found himself in an increasingly uncomfortable position. He personally hoped to see 'many more comprehensive schools' replacing 'market town' grammars (quoted in *The Times*, 8 April 1965), but such statements served only to antagonize local grammar school preservation groups and Conservative backbenchers. Comprehensive education, Boyle argued, was an issue to be resolved at the local, rather than national, level and he pointed out that, in many localities, Conservative enthusiasm for comprehensives surpassed that of their political opponents (Crook, 1993, p. 54). Boyle had been initially attracted to tiered secondary reorganization solutions by following the Leicestershire experiment and reading the arguments of Robin Pedley (Kerckhoff et al, 1996, p. 21). The West Riding pilot subsequently persuaded him that middle school schemes were preferable, though he endorsed the view that LEAs should await Lady Plowden's report before finalising their plans for the three tiers (*The Teacher*, 4 June 1965).

As anticipated, the Plowden Report (DES, 1967) did endorse middle schools and further recommended that children should transfer at the ages of eight and 12. Middle school comprehensive schemes had a particular appeal to Conservative-controlled authorities seeking to abolish the eleven-plus without creating 'monster' comprehensive schools. By mid-1967 Merton, Oxford and Wallasey LEAs had announced plans to abandon the eleven-plus and to introduce three-tier schemes (Crook, 1993, p. 56). Southampton followed soon afterwards (*TES*, 31 May 1968) and in June 1968 the *TES* listed some further 21 comprehensive schemes that had been approved by the DES (*TES*, 7 June 1968). The Labour government had real grounds

for satisfaction with its ‘softly softly’ approach of persuasion rather than legislation. Instead of focusing on its success, however, Ted Short, the-then Secretary of State for Education, was targeting those LEAs – around 20 out of 146 - that had not responded to Circular 10/65. A parliamentary bill was prepared during the final months of 1969, only to be withdrawn when Harold Wilson objected to its wording (diary entry, 9 December 1969 in Benn, 1988, p. 218).

Since the Second World War the education system for England and Wales was widely referred to as ‘a central service locally administered’. But Short’s determination to legislate marked a watershed for central and local government relations in education and ended the DES’s cordial relationship with the AEC (Cooke and Gosden, 1986, p. 80). In March 1969 Keith Robinson, CEO for Southport, a Tory-controlled ‘laggard’ LEA that had formulated only an interim plan, complained to the AEC Secretary, Sir William Alexander, that his Education Committee was prepared to challenge the Secretary of State, explaining

My Authority maintained its reluctance to define an ultimate, fully comprehensive scheme. They did not declare themselves against comprehensive education in principle but took the view that they wanted further opportunity to evaluate various schemes and keep their options open. . . . It seems clear from informal discussions with the Department of Education and Science that they are now taking the line that they require the Authority to commit itself to a specific fully comprehensive scheme before my secondary school building projects can be considered. . . . I fear . . . that my Authority is going to take a dim view of the present Department of Education and Science attitude. The word ‘blackmail’ will spring readily to the lips of my elected members who will want to fight.

[6]

Alexander urged Short to reconsider, contending that legislation was unnecessary and likely to harm, rather than accelerate the drive for comprehensive education. It was an argument that fell upon deaf ears. Short’s reply indicated that while he valued LEA freedoms, these ‘can scarcely include the possibility of frustrating national policy’ [7].

But again the bill did not proceed into law at this point, becoming a casualty of Wilson's decision to call a general election.

One of the first decisions of Short's Conservative successor, Margaret Thatcher, was to publish Circular 10/70, effectively withdrawing Labour's circular of five years earlier. The Circular stated that 'Authorities will now be freer to determine the shape of secondary provision in their areas' (DES, 1970). The immediate effect was that a number of Conservative councils halted their reorganization plans and referred the question back to their education committees. Most decided subsequently to proceed, however. Indeed, Richmond-on-Thames, which had held out against comprehensivization in the late 1960s surprisingly reversed its policy during Thatcher's period (1970-74) at the DES (Kerckhoff et al, 1996, p. 36), while Conservative-controlled Leeds pressed ahead with its three-tier, fully comprehensive scheme (Fenwick and Woodthorpe, 1980). The DES now discontinued its earlier practice of giving administrative approval to non-statutory plans. Instead, the Secretary of State used the powers invested in her under Section 13 of the 1944 Act to judge the merits of closure or re-designation proposals affecting individual schools. Contrary to the wording of Circular 10/70 Thatcher actually demonstrated rather more inclination to interfere with LEA proposals than any of her predecessors by 'saving' some 94 grammar schools that had been identified for re-designation and by rejecting the views of the majority of petitioners in Kidderminster and Barnet. Even so, she was unable to halt what she later called the 'universal comprehensive thing' (interview in the *Daily Mail*, 13 May 1987, quoted in Chitty, 1989, pp. 54-55). More than 1,400 comprehensive (including middle) schools were established between 1970 and 1974, many of which were located in Conservative LEAs. Thus, Margaret Thatcher presided over the creation of more comprehensives than any other Secretary of State for Education.

#### POLITICAL AND PERSONNEL FACTORS

The type of secondary reorganization scheme that a particular LEA sought to adopt or implement depended greatly upon the ideas and actions of individuals and groups. A change of local council control naturally precipitated a change of personnel on the Education Committee and sometimes introduced new thinking about secondary reorganization. Early political support for comprehensive education was to be found

in some of the large cities, notably Bristol, London and Manchester. In May 1952, after victory at the polls, Bristol's Labour group declared that its policy to develop comprehensive schools across the city would eventually 'transform the educational system of Bristol from an instrument perpetuating class distinctions into an instrument for promoting social unity' [8]. But not all local Labour groups were enthusiastic about comprehensive education in the immediate post-war years. Many Socialist politicians, often themselves the beneficiaries of a grammar-school education, continued to express confidence in bipartism well into the 1960s (Kerckhoff et al, 1996, p. 164).

It is far from clear whether strong political enthusiasm for comprehensive education quickened the pace of reorganization. Some 'progressive' LEAs, such as Leicestershire and the West Riding, were constrained by demography and the suitability of buildings, while issues relating to voluntary and direct grant schools hampered the pace of change in larger cities like Birmingham, Bristol and London. LEA case studies reveal the significance of individual politicians involved in reorganization at the local level. In Stoke-on-Trent, for example, Bob Cant, Labour Chairman of the Education Committee and subsequently a city MP, drove the process of comprehensivization, while the energy and influence over many years of Lady Shena Simon (Manchester) and the Reverend Frederick Vyvyan-Jones (Bristol) was equally notable. In Leeds the Conservative Councillor Patrick Crotty demonstrated a degree of interest in education untypical of his party colleagues. He played a key role in marketing the three-tier scheme to Leeds Conservatives as a means of re-orientating the grammar schools without destroying them (Fenwick and Woodthorpe, 1980, p. 24). When strong political direction was absent, the checks and balances of local democracy often preserved the *status quo*. Instructed by their borough, city or county council to draw up proposals for the abolition of the eleven-plus, education committees sometimes sent the answer that they were satisfied with existing selection measures. But when proposals were drawn up, the full council sometimes rejected these. Even when there was agreement that comprehensives should be introduced disagreements could break out over the best means of reorganizing.

The role of CEOs - and sometimes, as in West Sussex and Northumberland, their deputies (Kerckhoff et al, 1996, p.168) - was in many instances crucial in challenging

old orthodoxies. Nowhere is this clearer than in the capital. For almost 30 years London's dynasty of Education Officers – Sir Graham Savage, John Brown, Sir William Houghton and Dr Eric Briault – reaffirmed the basic principles of the *London School Plan* and of 11-18 schools. The arrival of Peter Newsam, initially as Briault's deputy and then his successor encouraged more lateral thinking during the 1970s and early 1980s. Newsam's enthusiasm for the three-tier system that he had helped to implement in the West Riding, where he had worked under Clegg, won over influential Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) members. Without Newsam's vision the reorganization of London secondary schools would probably have halted in the mid-1970s (Kerckhoff et al, 1996, pp. 79-80).

The relationship between CEOs and local politicians could be tense. During the early 1950s Lady Shena Simon became frustrated by Manchester CEO Norman Fisher's disinclination to support tripartism. When Fisher left the LEA to take up another post in 1955 she set out her expectations of the new post-holder to a colleague:

The Chief official ought to be prepared to carry out whatever policy the committee decided upon, but we have had recent experience of how, without apparent opposition – the official can obstruct.

(Lady Simon to Alderman Sir Maurice Pariser, 7 March 1955, quoted in Kerckhoff et al, 1996, p. 86)

These hopes were to be frustrated. Relations between Manchester's Labour politicians and Fisher's successor, John Elliot, were strained at the best of times and when the reorganization plans were finalized, shortly before the publication of Circular 10/65, it was reported that Elliot was 'merely informed' of them (*TES*, 28 May 1965). Birmingham's CEO, Sir Lionel Russell, found it impossible to satisfy his political masters from both major parties. Despite producing plan after plan, objections were persistently raised concerning the future of the King Edward foundation grammar schools and the absence of suitable sites for all-through comprehensives. Even Alec Clegg, arguably the most dynamic and influential CEO of his generation, did not escape political censure in the West Riding. Here, the peculiarities of semi-autonomous excepted districts militated against the kind of comprehensive uniformity that he wished to see (Gosden and Sharp, 1978, pp. 181, 184-85, 190).

By contrast, many county CEOs enjoyed considerable freedoms. In Conservative-controlled Leicestershire there was an acceptance, which was only displaced during the 1970s, that Stewart Mason and his County Hall colleagues were best placed to make decisions about the form and structure of secondary education. Every decision relating to the Leicestershire experiment and plan came before the county's School Organization and Staffing Committee whose agendas and operations were controlled by Mason himself. Leicestershire Education Committee and the County Council subsequently endorsed the recommendations of this committee without debate or question.

#### CONSULTATION AND REORGANIZATION

The consultation practices of LEAs varied greatly, sometimes providing grounds for bitter complaint. Different perspectives about the adequacy or otherwise of consultation characterized the comprehensive debate from its earliest days. Stewart Mason maintained, for example, that the Leicestershire experiment was launched in 1957 with the full co-operation of primary, secondary modern and grammar school heads (Mason, 1965, p. 53). But this does not accord with the recollections of the two grammar school heads. In 1981 one remembered that 'It was just sprung upon us', while the other explained that, upon hearing of the Director's plans on a Friday evening, he personally visited each member of his staff on the following day to ensure that they did not hear the news first from the local press (Jones, 1988, pp. 61-62).

In respect of its consultation arrangements Bristol LEA achieved the greatest notoriety during the mid-1960s. The city's 1964 plan controversially sought to establish 'neighbourhood' comprehensive schools by means of a 'zoning' process. The LEA also announced that it would discontinue the practice of purchasing free places in the city's seven direct grant schools so as to ensure that the comprehensives would recruit their fair share of high-achieving secondary-age children. A strong attack on the Bristol proposals was mounted by the Secondary Education Defence Association, which also developed as a national organization on the right wing of the Conservative Party (Crook, 1993, p. 55), and by the Bristol *Evening Post*. In June 1965 the newspaper published a highly-critical report by Professor Boris Ford. Having studied the evidence, Ford concluded that neighbourhood comprehensives were more likely to

prevent, rather than enhance a diversity of intake. He also asserted that the LEA 'has gone forward with astonishingly little detailed study, research experiment, testing, redesigning which would have seemed essential in so large a project' (Bristol *Evening Post*, 23 June 1965). In general, it seems that lessons were learnt from the Bristol controversy. The ILEA, which assumed the LCC's education powers in April 1965, was particularly anxious that public discussion should precede its formal response to Circular 10/65. Thus, between December 1966 and February of the following year some 42 public meetings were held, attended by more than 19,000 parents (Kerckhoff et al, 1996, p. 71). Most LEAs, meanwhile, routinely co-opted head teachers and/or teachers to reorganization working parties, a practice that Edward Short sought to formalise in a 1968 circular (*TES*, 23 August 1968).

A close eye was kept on LEAs' consultation arrangements by the various teacher unions and associations, although they were interested principally in their members' conditions of service and career prospects. Where mergers were proposed there were understandable concerns that women teachers might lose out to men and that non-graduates would be disadvantaged. Associations with large memberships working in grammar schools tended to be the most outspoken. Immediately after Labour's 1964 general election victory, for example, E.C. Axford, Headmaster of Ossett Grammar School, drafted a confidential memorandum for his fellow members on the Incorporated Association of Head Masters (IAHM) executive, entitled 'Now Labour Is In'. He urged the IAHM to adopt a policy of vigilance and resistance to unsatisfactory LEA schemes, pointing to their recent success in forcing the abandonment of a reorganization proposal from Flintshire LEA [9].

Gauging the strength of community feeling towards comprehensive education was difficult, because those parents who joined such organizations as the non-political CASE or the left-of-centre Comprehensive Schools Committee (CSC) were no more typical than those who marched against grammar school closures. But Tyrrell Burgess, a journalist, academic and member of the ILEA could find little fault with local democratic processes when he wrote to Boyle, the opposition front bench Education spokesman in June 1967:



I've now had the chance to look at innumerable plans, and I honestly cannot say that there is much evidence of haste and muddle. They have been pondering it, most of them, for two years or more! And it will scarcely help to retain public confidence and interest in local government if leading politicians keep making sweeping accusations of incompetence, especially since these are not justified.

In the second place, it ignores the astonishing ability and common sense in the Department of Education and Science now devoted to this issue. I suppose it can be argued that this particular social revolution is almost wholly due to political and administrative intelligence in the schools branch.

In the third place, complaints about haste in this simply feed the national neurosis that no change should ever be made in less than half a century. The debate on comprehensive schools has been going on for two decades, such schools have been running all over the country for nearly as long, plans have taken two years and exhaustive consultations to prepare, they will take until the 1970s to put into effect. Scarcely evidence of headlong and impulsive speed! [10]

Many of the anxieties about LEA proposals were pragmatic, rather than ideological. How would catchment areas be defined? Did middle school arrangements mean that eight- or nine-year-old pupils have long journeys or busy roads to cross? Were schools adequately equipped with such facilities as laboratories and libraries? Were school canteens and dining rooms geared up to serve more than 1,000 lunchtime meals? Did former grammar school staff need further training to teach comprehensive school pupils?

## CONCLUSIONS

The drive for comprehensive education in England and Wales was a 'bottom up', rather than 'top down' initiative. During the late 1940s the same Labour government that oversaw the creation of the National Health Service and the establishment of the Welfare State pursued a far from radical secondary education policy. Indeed, it has been suggested that the conservatism of Ellen Wilkinson and George Tomlinson stunted the growth of the comprehensive school movement by 20 years (Rubinstein,

1979, p. 161). A growing number of LEAs felt uncomfortable with eleven-plus selection during the 1950s, particularly because of the effects of what Stewart Mason termed the 'deadening backwash' upon primary schools (Mason, 1965, p. 52). LEAs controlled by both of the major political parties experimented with different selection procedures, sometimes as a first step towards the objective of establishing comprehensive education throughout the administrative area.

The *London School Plan* influenced early conceptions of the comprehensive school, but the vision it set out was essentially urban in character. It had an appeal to LEAs like Bristol, Liverpool and Manchester, which were in the vanguard of what Simon terms the 'breakout'. But other local initiatives were of still greater importance, because they suggested that selection could be ended without the construction of large, all-through institutions. In advance of Circular 10/65 Croydon, Doncaster and Leicestershire LEAs each gave their names to two-tier patterns that delayed selection, while the 1964 Education Act ushered in fully comprehensive arrangements in parts of the West Riding. With LEAs taking the lead, there was no strong case for the Labour government to legislate in favour of comprehensive education in 1965. The rationale for abandoning the approach of persuasion in favour of compulsion was scarcely stronger four years later when Ted Short persuaded the Wilson cabinet to support his 'zero tolerance' approach. The Plowden report had, by this time, stimulated an interest in secondary reorganization from LEAs that had initially resisted Circular 10/65 and DES officials were so overwhelmed with paperwork from compliant authorities that they were seeking summary updates from the CSC (Kerckhoff et al, 1996, p. 29).

The winter and early spring of 1969-70 marked the beginning of the end of the post-war partnership in education between central and local government. Short's misjudgement contributed to this, but he was not wholly responsible. Edward Boyle's departure from politics in 1969 symbolized the end of an old order of politicians who had unsuccessfully sought to prevent education from becoming a political football. His successor as Shadow Education Secretary, Margaret Thatcher, was more in tune with the 'Black Paper' thinking that was to significantly influence future Conservative Party policy. DES relations with CEOs and Education Committee chairs cooled after 1970, while Thatcher became the patron of grammar school preservation groups.

The project of comprehensive education, which LEAs had begun, was never completed, nor did it advance sufficiently to be fairly judged (Crook, Power and Whitty, 1999). When Labour re-introduced its request for comprehensive plans from selective LEAs in 1974 Secretary of State Fred Mulley faced defiance from seven Conservative authorities while another, Tameside, decided to withdraw the comprehensive plan submitted by its Labour predecessors. The Tameside dispute ended in a 1975 High Court adjudication against Mulley, who retaliated with an Education Act – subsequently repealed by Margaret Thatcher’s government – requiring the submission of reorganization proposals from still-selective LEAs (Crook, Power and Whitty, 1999, pp. 15-16). By this time, however, the national education landscape was changing. The ‘Great Debate’ of the late 1970s shifted the focus away from structures and towards the issues of standards, curriculum and teacher training. Subsequently, in the name of ‘choice’ and ‘diversity’ LEAs lost their monopoly of control over schools and school systems. Indeed, under New Labour’s strict grammar school ballot regulations they have even lost their right to participate in the kind of debates that gave comprehensive reorganization a democratic flavour.

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## NOTES

- [1] The joint Leicester University- Duke University (North Carolina) project was entitled ‘When a society changes its school system: the introduction of comprehensive schools in Great Britain’ between 1991 and 1993 and produced a major book (Kerckhoff et al, 1996). Thanks are due to the Spencer Foundation and to the custodians of the primary source materials listed below.
- [2] University of Leeds, Boyle Papers, MS 660/25217, briefing paper headed ‘Prime Minister’, 3 July 1963.
- [3] University of Warwick Modern Records Centre, CASE archives, MSS 236/3 South Bucks file, memorandum of 24 November 1966.

- [4] University of Warwick Modern Records Centre, CASE archives, MSS 236/3, Richmond file, 'An account of the campaign against selection at 11+ in Richmond-upon-Thames' by Joan Sallis (1970).
- [5] University of Warwick Modern Records Centre, CASE archives, MSS 236/3, 'Report of the Committee for the Year ended 31<sup>st</sup> July 1966'.
- [6] University of Leeds, AEC papers, A1113, Robinson to Alexander, 17 March 1969.
- [7] University of Leeds, AEC papers, A1113, Short to Alexander, 26 March 1970.
- [8] Bristol Records Office, Education Committee Labour Group minutes, 21 May 1952.
- [9] University of Warwick Modern Records Centre, IAHM archives, MSS 58/3/1, Liverpool file 2, draft memorandum sent to the IAHM President, E.H. Goddard with a note, 16 October 1964.
- [10] University of Leeds, Boyle Papers MS 660/2582, Burgess to Boyle, 21 June 1967.

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