

University of Hull

Did the rising tide of state education lift all boats?
An investigation into the secondary education and attainment
policy towards white working-class boys in England, 1997 –
2010.

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Abstract

This thesis is an evaluation of the secondary education and attainment policies of the New Labour governments, from 1997 to 2010, and of the extent to which that improved educational outcomes for white working-class boys in England. The study begins by mapping the intellectual development of the Labour Party's secondary education policy from 1941 to 1994. The main body of the thesis appraises the performance of New Labour's flagship policies during the premierships of both Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. Finally, a case study chapter seeks to set out the quantitative data on the GCSE performances of white working-class boys in some of the lowest performing local authorities in this period and broadly considers the influence of both cultural and social factors.

This thesis contends that New Labour's efforts to improve the educational attainment of white working-class boys was successful to a limited and partial extent. The success can be attributed to interventionist policies that raised the quality and standards in schools, albeit these initiatives were often narrow and geographically or institutionally defined. Furthermore, New Labour's conception of the state prevented it from considering wider cultural and social issues that can have an influencing effect on educational attainment.

The original contribution of this thesis is a major assessment of the flagship domestic policy of the most recent period of Labour government filling a gap in the literature of contemporary British political history. A further claim to originality is the use of interview material to inform this thesis, drawing upon conversations with elite political actors from the period facilitates new insights and a deeper understanding.

For my grandma, Nancy Farrell
(1934 – 2023)

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Chapter 1

Introduction

This thesis seeks to investigate and evaluate the secondary education and attainment policies of the New Labour governments, from 1997 to 2010, towards white working-class boys in England. A study into the subject of this thesis is germane for three distinct reasons. Firstly, in 1997 Tony Blair and New Labour's headline commitment was to education. It would continue to be a major policy priority throughout the 13 year period that the Labour Party was in government. Given the significant political attention education received from successive Labour governments, that were committed to improving secondary education by implementing policies to raise quality and standards, to what extent did these policies result in improved educational attainment for white working-class boys in England? Secondly, New Labour's record in education and the consequent outcomes of its policies has been neglected in British political history. The limited existing research is often included as part of a broader theme in the literature.¹ This is despite the Labour Party's close interest in education since its inception. As a result of this paucity of literature, other academic disciplines have supplanted British political history, primarily education studies,² subsequently dominating our understanding of the subject. Thirdly, the published studies considering New Labour's education policy are overly focused on the administrative aspects of policy, such as the structure of the education system, through which education policy has been implemented. The governments of Blair and Brown need to be placed in a broader context that considers the extent to which they have achieved their objectives, in addition to other contributing factors such as cultural and social norms.

1.1 Research aims

The main aim of this thesis is to assess the extent to which the New Labour governments' secondary education and attainment policies, between 1997 and 2010, improved the educational outcomes of white working-class boys in England. The modified idiom in the title of this thesis, popularised by President John F. Kennedy but originating elsewhere,³ refers to the idea that economic growth benefits many cohorts of a given population, including both the disadvantaged and their wealthier peers. Therefore, this modified idiom characterises the broad education and attainment policies of New Labour in government as an attempt to foster

a rising tide but questions the extent to which it lifted the educational outcomes for all pupils. This necessitates an assessment of the Blair governments, which comprises the bulk of the thesis, found in chapters 3 and 4. This is followed by a similar appraisal of Gordon Brown's government in chapter 5. However, prior to setting out an investigation into a key aspect of recent British political history, it is necessary to provide a firm foundation from which to build our understanding of the subject. Hence, an historical account of the intellectual development of the Labour Party's post-war secondary education policy, and the ideas and values that influenced it, is necessary.

To understand how and why New Labour formed its secondary education and attainment policies, it is first necessary to have an historical account of the intellectual development of the Party's ideas on secondary education. This consisted of competing visions of both the means, in terms of the structure of secondary education within England, and its ends, that is to say the values and ideas that the Labour Party pursued. The content of chapter 2 of this thesis maps the internal discourse within the Labour Party from 1941 and the wartime coalition government, through the post-war period up to 1994. This thesis then goes on to consider Blair's secondary education and attainment policies between 1997 and 2007, in chapters 3 and 4, aiming to fill gaps in the literature of British political history's account of education policy and to demonstrate its impact on white working-class boys. In chapter 5, the record of Gordon Brown's government is considered with a similar aim and attempts to discern whether this was consolidation or innovation. Following this, chapter 6 aims to demonstrate, through five separate case studies of local authorities, the extent of improvement in the attainment of white working-class boys in some of the lowest performing areas in England, and to fulfil a gap in the literature by considering the role of cultural and social factors.

1.2 Hypothesis

The working hypothesis of this thesis is that New Labour had only partial success in fostering a rising tide of state education, as the improvements in the attainment of white working-class boys in England were to a limited extent. Traditionally, the centre left in British politics have been more comfortable in reforming the structural components of England's education system. Similarly, those authors who have appraised this topic, regularly raise this issue and

other touchstones such as selection. In contrast, New Labour were both prepared to address political shibboleths and much more comfortable with individual agency in education. However, New Labour had a blind spot for white working-class boys, as the resources devoted to improving secondary education and attainment could not mitigate disadvantage outside the school gates, nor the influence of broader cultural and social factors. This then, leads to three distinct research questions:

1. To what extent were the New Labour governments successful in raising the attainment of white working-class boys in secondary schools in England between 1997 and 2010?
2. What factors were influential in the shaping of secondary education and attainment policy under the governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown?
3. To what extent were cultural factors a material influence on attainment in secondary education in England in this same period?

1.3 Thesis structure

This thesis consists of seven chapters, including the introduction. Chapter 2 reviews the literature concerning the intellectual development of the Labour Party's secondary education policy. It begins in 1941 with the wartime coalition government and provides an historical account of the key political actors, ideas and values that influenced and shaped the party's education policy up to 1994. From this point of the thesis, all chapters contain interview material with key political actors from the New Labour governments. Chapter 3 surveys the period between 1994 and 2001, from the election of Tony Blair as leader and up to the eve of the 2001 general election. It continues to chart the intellectual development of secondary education policy in the Labour Party by marking the changes initiated by the election of Tony Blair and the inception of New Labour. This includes exploring the ideational shift, and changes to personnel and policy in opposition. Following electoral success in 1997, there is an account of the implementation of the policies developed in opposition and an assessment of the extent to which they were improved attainment for white working-class boys in England. Chapter 4 evaluates the remainder of Blair's time as Prime Minister, from 2001 to 2007. This includes the development and implementation of major public service reform and flagship policies in secondary education including the Academies programme amongst others. Chapter

5 provides an examines Gordon Brown's government, and questions whether his administration consolidated New Labour's policies or was an innovating period. This then appraises the impact of these policy choices on the educational attainment of white working-class boys. Chapter 6 departs from the chronological approach of this thesis, instead it adopts a case study approach that utilises quantitative data, collated by government, to assess the extent of the impact of New Labour government policy on the educational attainment of white working-class boys. This is complemented by data considering social influences, such as male unemployment and single parent families with dependents. It also includes a discussion of the understanding amongst key political actors of the role of the state, culture, and other social factors. Chapter 7 provides a conclusion with a summary of findings, limitations to the study and suggestions for further research.

1.4 Methodology

The methodological approach utilised in this study is broadly termed hermeneutics. The methodology will be underpinned by a mixed methods approach to data collection. While relying mainly on qualitative techniques, including semi-structured interviews with elite actors and archival material, this will be supplemented by quantitative sources such as government statistics. In providing for a firm methodological basis of the thesis, it is first necessary to establish why a qualitative investigation is preferable, before establishing a common understanding of the qualitative nature of the study and the hermeneutical approach, followed by the data collection methods and techniques.

1.5 Why qualitative?

In analysing the secondary education policies formulated by the Labour Party in opposition and subsequently implemented in government between 1994 and 2010, and evaluating their impact on the educational outcomes of white working-class boys, there is a positive case that demonstrates the value and relative strengths of conducting a qualitative study on this subject, in comparison to other methodological approaches.

Firstly, a study of the education policies of New Labour between 1994 and 2010 is a subject which lends itself to the interpretivist tradition of qualitative methodology and the historical method. Although there is no single authoritative definition of qualitative research, there is

broad agreement that this approach is often adopted to answer questions related to the understanding and interpretation of meaning, human experience and behaviour.⁴ As concisely summarised by Kavanagh, political history places the emphasis on “explanation and understanding, not on formulating laws.”⁵ The central role of political actors in this study provides significant material for a qualitative approach. As a complex and layered issue of increasing political salience throughout the 20th Century, education and schools slowly became a more prominent policy issue in the post-war period to which many gifted and leading political actors turned their attention. The greater involvement of these political actors in education policy, not only presents an opportunity to study the actions and decision-making of these individuals but also necessitates the consideration of the underlying assumptions that informed their actions such as their values, beliefs and understanding of their own behaviour. These are significant contributing factors that shape the course of historical events, and which a qualitative and historical approach is more able to account for and explain through the use of a hermeneutical method and appropriate data collection techniques. In comparison, other methodologies including quantitative approaches preferred by political scientists, would attempt to provide generalisations regarding political decision-making, and may overlook individual experience, the meaning that this brings to the data and would not be able to codify these personal motivations as effectively. Nor could the personal account be accurately captured by other analytical approaches such as structuralism or institutionalism, which would diminish the relative agency of political actors, and instead seek to explain their decision-making with reference to the broader framework of governance, their place within it and its impact on behaviour and social norms.⁶

Secondly, a significant strength of the qualitative approach over quantitative, in this instance, is its ability to locate historical events in their context. Firstly, by building a more comprehensive picture of the social, economic, political and cultural conditions of the historical period under investigation, it provides important contextual information to understand the world that political actors were operating in and is a necessary pre-requisite for the analysis of the actor’s role. Secondly, the construction of a broader and deeper understanding of the conditions, anchored in an awareness of the pertinent socio-economic and political factors of the time, is significant as this facilitates a fuller analysis of an actor’s actions, their interpretation of the world around them and of their own behaviour. As these

factors often occupy an important role in contributing to conditions, having an enabling or limiting effect, which in turn, influences the actions of political actors and their decision-making process. For instance, the need for a broader understanding of the historical context may also include taking into account the place of education in the Labour Party's ethos and history, most notably demonstrated by the Workers Educational Association,^a and recognising that it holds an important place in social and economic domestic policy in its own right, as a long term objective of furthering secondary education and as a means for achieving greater equality, all of which must be considered. By immersing research in the world of the political actors, their understanding of the world, meaning and their behaviour, in conjunction with recognising key influential factors, this approach lays a firm foundation for analysis through the understanding of each distinct aspect, thereby creating a greater interpretation of the whole. Together, these provide for a strong analytical narrative to be formed.

Thirdly, other researchers may adopt a quantitative methodology to approach the issue of educational outcomes for a specific demographic, arguing that there is greater merit in both its design and data collection methods, utilising techniques such as statistical analysis and representative sampling to determine the impact of New Labour's secondary education policies on the educational outcomes of white-working class boys. The design of a quantitative study would adopt a scientific approach through the testing of a hypothesis in an attempt to provide broadly applicable generalisations and identify correlative relationships. Furthermore, this would include controlling for variables, the manipulation of an independent variable and therefore a claim of superior objectivity. This would bring value to the subject by offering a coherent analysis pertinent to secondary education outcomes and results in relation to factors such as gender, ethnicity and social grade. Despite the obvious rigour of such a methodological approach in providing an answer to questions in relation to the attainment and outcomes of the secondary education of white working-class boys, its design and data

^a The Workers Educational Association (WEA) is emblematic of a relationship between education and social and political change. The WEA sought to provide free adult education to the working class, thereby providing an opportunity for self-improvement, where there was previously an absence of such provision. Furthermore, many of the Labour Party's early thinkers volunteered with the WEA, introducing an intimate link with the development of the party's political and moral philosophy. For more on this, see; Beech, M. & Hickson, K. *Labour's Thinkers: The Intellectual Roots of Labour from Tawney to Gordon Brown*, (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2007); and, Nuttall, J. 'The Labour Party and the Improvement of Minds: The Case of Tony Crosland', *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 46 (1), (2003).

gathering techniques would be of limited value in attempting to explain the decision-making of political actors. For instance, contacting former leading political actors to have them respond to a questionnaire with a choice of set responses would facilitate a quantitative analysis of attitudes towards the educational outcomes of white working-class boys, however those who have held high office usually display a preference for longer form interviews with open ended questions in which they can explain their thoughts and considerations during decision-making. A quantitative approach in this instance would fail to provide a more complete evaluation of the available data, caused by an insufficient understanding of individuals behaviour, and the deeper historical analysis that is required to for a satisfactory account.

The study will adopt a qualitative approach to understand the beliefs and values of political actors, the understanding and interpretation of their own behaviour and the context in which they were operating, in order to offer a fuller evaluation of their actions and the influence of their circumstances on their decision-making, policy formulation and prioritisation. Together these factors will compose a fuller account of whether during this process, leading political actors were cognisant of the educational position of white working-class boys and their relative level was actively considered by those who held senior and influential positions in the New Labour project, and whether they sought to ameliorate the educational outcomes of this demographic group.

1.6 Hermeneutics

The methods and techniques I intend to utilise in this study and the subsequent analysis I will present have a distinct theoretical underpinning and will broadly follow the method of hermeneutics. The literature concerning hermeneutics has a long history with many notable contributions that have developed the discipline further. However, a concise summary is set out by Zimmerman. Hermeneutics is primarily concerned with interpretation, understanding and meaning, in both theory and practice.⁷ Hermeneutics is an essential framework through which to interrogate political history, because an understanding of the values and beliefs which inform both the behaviour and world-view of an individual actor, is a pre-requisite for a more comprehensive explanation of their actions and decision-making.

A significant contribution to the methodology of hermeneutics is Alasdair MacIntyre's chapter 'A mistake about causality in social science'⁸ in which he identifies three features that must be taken into account to facilitate a more substantial understanding of history. Briefly these are; an attempt to address the relationship between actions and beliefs, context and how these categories influence the decision-making of an agent in their given context. From the outset, MacIntyre rejects the work of other social theorists whom he believed sought to diminish the relationship between belief and action, granting the former too greater independence. In response, MacIntyre argues that beliefs and actions should be seen as distinct from one another and that the relationship between the two is "internal" and "conceptual".⁹ MacIntyre illustrates this distinction by setting out two particular examples. Firstly, how an individual can achieve different outcomes via the same means, that is to say that although the physical movements may be the same, the outcome and context is distinct such as an individual writing their name may be either paying a bill, doodling or agreeing to a document.¹⁰ In his second example, MacIntyre portrays how the same outcome may be achieved by different means. For instance the action of paying a bill could be achieved through the passing of coins, paper or by speaking.¹¹ MacIntyre demonstrates two significant points in these examples; in regard to the former, MacIntyre's explicit intention is to establish the pertinent role that context has in informing an individual's choice of action. Secondly, as an individual may choose to act differently in any given circumstance even though they are seeking the same outcome. This illustrates how one or more individuals may perform the same physical movements, although they are driven by different motivations and seek to achieve alternative outcomes. A separate but related issue is recognised by Hickson, when he makes the distinction that an individual's beliefs are inclined to change over time, and it is therefore necessary to record the agent's own understanding and interpretation of their beliefs and actions at the point in time in which the events occurred.¹²

Once MacIntyre has established a more satisfactory relationship between action and belief, he turns to the context in which actors are operating. While it is necessary to have an understanding of the values and beliefs of an actor, the context in which actors operate provides an additional layer to this interpretation. He summarises his thesis cogently when he notes that "the limits of what I can do are set by the limits of the descriptions *available* to me"¹³ and co-opts a quote from Stuart Hampshire to demonstrate his point further.

Hampshire outlines how language and descriptions utilised by contemporary authors to assign intent to actors would not have been available to the agents at the time in which they acted.¹⁴ Hickson offers a succinct and effective demonstration of MacIntyre's argument, noting that Martin Luther could not have described his actions as instigating the Reformation, as such terminology was not available. A satisfactory description in this case would refer to Luther's beliefs which motivated his critique of Catholicism. This description would have been available and intelligible to Luther and refers both his values and beliefs which informs a personal interpretation of his own behaviour.¹⁵

MacIntyre's final point is particularly pertinent to this thesis, as he outlines the significance of an agent's beliefs and values in relation to decision-making and the context that they are operating. He notes, decisions and choices are related to the agency of actors, their internal reasoning and hold significance as the expression of beliefs. MacIntyre reinforces this point by outlining that in order to fully understand an actor's decision-making, it is necessary to clarify the internal criteria applied by the actor to the choice, why this criteria was applied instead of an alternative and the rationality behind such an approach.¹⁶ Here, Stolz makes an important contribution, highlighting that human agency is connected to the internal relationship between beliefs and actions, and that any evaluation of an agent's behaviour is conditional on the explanation of the internal rationality of their actions and whether this conforms to social context.¹⁷ This essentially draws together the three strands of the hermeneutical approach that MacIntyre sets out. To fully understand the actions of actors, three traits are required: an understanding of their values and beliefs is necessary as they influence behaviour; in corroboration, the descriptions available to actors in the context they operated are required for accurate interpretations of beliefs; and lastly, an interpretation of beliefs is central to uncovering the rationality behind decision-making by actors.

1.7 Data collection: Methods and techniques

In composing an historical account of this subject, utilising a hermeneutic approach, there will be both original primary data and secondary sources used. Beginning with the primary sources, these will include: archival material, such as the Johnson Papers; semi-structured interviews with elite actors; and autobiographies, memoirs and diaries. For the latter, secondary sources will include: academic publications including books and journal articles, as

well as the use of government statistical publications as a quantitative source of data. Given the key place of both semi-structured elite interviews and archival research in this study, these will be discussed briefly below, before moving on to other primary and secondary sources.

The place of archival research as one of two primary sources for this project confers distinct benefits. Firstly, utilising available archival sources offers an account of events and can provide crucial information such as conclusions, summaries, political actors in attendance and key contributions to discussion. However, an important and similar caveat that applies to voting intention polling is also applicable to archival documents, and that is that although they are an important source of information, they are effectively a snapshot of a point in time, that provides contemporary insight of events at a particular point in time, and is not able to tell a broader story. Furthermore, although day-to-day contemporary practice in political administration is to include the date on documents, this does not necessarily mean that the document and its contents was created at the time events took place.

Secondly, a considerable advantage of utilising archival research and document analysis is to be able to identify the significant developments that contributed towards decision-making. In the case of archival research, this can be used to demonstrate the discourse that political actors have engaged in and the considerations they take into account during strategic decision-making as part of the policy process. Such interactions between actors would be recorded in archival documents including minutes, correspondence, diaries, and personal papers. In the case of the latter, document analysis can provide significant insight into the development of policy through the iteration of a draft document's contents, specifically the inclusion, absence, revision, or removal of content can indicate a material change of intention when compared to the definitive version. Document analysis is particularly pertinent to government papers such as consultation documents (Green and White Papers), speeches by key political actors, election manifestos, amongst many others.

Thirdly, the use of archive material is an alternative source of information that can be utilised to form a broader historical account of events and minimise the disadvantages associated with semi-structured elite interviews. Interviews with former political actors and individuals are not without their issues,¹⁸ as participants may focus on their interpretation of their own

behaviour, a particular grievance, or have a prepared narrative of events. Similarly, as most events occurred more than decade ago, an interview participant's recall of events may inadvertently include inaccuracies and inconsistencies. The use of archive material has distinct strengths in being utilised in conjunction with semi-structured elite interviews. As an alternative record, archive material is an important source that can be used to cross-reference against a participant's recollection or to resolve a potential conflict. This strategy would minimise the possibility of errors that go unchecked due to participant's recall as the only source, thereby creating a more coherent and complete version of events, and strengthening the subsequent analysis.

The second key primary source that will form part of this study is semi-structured elite interviews. These are important, since the role of individual political actors in the Labour Party, in both opposition and government between 1994 and 2010, are directly related to the setting of policy and consequently are tied to the educational outcomes of white working-class boys. The conducting of interviews with political actors can be considered to be hermeneutics in action, as this is a technique used to acquire the perspective of a particular individual. The design of the data collection method, in this instance semi-structured interviews utilising subject related open-ended question format followed by alternative supplementary questions, is primarily focused on giving the participant time and space to respond with open and lengthy answers. Such an interview style is primarily concerned with depth through the uncovering of meaning, understanding of the participant's values and beliefs, and their understanding of the context in which they operated.

Interviews with elite actors further confer several advantages on the research, with regards to building an insightful account of events and the validity of the case. In his article on elite interviewing, Richards briefly sets out the relative advantages.¹⁹ In the first instance, it bolsters the studies claim to originality as interview participants may reveal information which has not been previously recorded. Secondly, participants can assist in the interpretation of documents. This is especially the case when conducting document analysis of papers which the interviewee has authored or of archival material, as this would facilitate a more effective use of the papers and archive collection, as well as offering insight into other primary and secondary written sources. A further advantage of elite interviews as one important source in

the methodological strategy of triangulation is set out by Davies.²⁰ Davies outlines arguments produced by other authors concerning the limitations of primary sources such as the incompleteness of archive material and bias in political memoirs. This leads Davies to argue that elite interviews are necessary to supplement the information of official accounts. In turn, the strategy of triangulation offers greater validity through a specific focus on a single subject, and as a corroborative technique whilst simultaneously being additive.

As this study is primarily concerned with the strategic deliberations of political actors in the development of the Labour Party's secondary education policy, the political actors selected to be interviewed will have to meet a defined criterion. Prior to and during the New Labour era, a broad range of political actors were involved and actively contributed to the modernisation process undertaken by the party. However, a smaller cohort of political actors would have been involved and had input into the groups that were tasked with developing the Labour Party's secondary education policy. The criteria are specifically predicated on identifying the individuals who were intimately involved in the party's policy development process, in either opposition or government, by the strategic shaping of and advising on policy, or were key to decision-making. In turn, this will lead to a narrow and defined range of individuals, the majority of whom would be considered to be operating at the highest levels of the Labour Party and government, from ministerial office holders in the Department for Education and those who shadowed the brief, to special and political advisers, and outsiders from organisations such as think tanks and institutions including higher education who contributed or were co-opted by the party.

In terms of the practical aspect of identifying and separating political actors who meaningfully contributed to policy discussions from those whose focus was employed on other sensitive political subjects such as media relations or economic analysis, literature is a fundamental component. Most notably, the annual *Dods Parliamentary Companion* offers a compendium of office holders and their advisors. However, this does not account for those who acted in a more informal capacity. To fully uncover those who were involved during the sixteen years that defined the New Labour period, academic literature provides an important source to identify individuals in accounts of policy development and implementation, such as Chitty,²¹ whose book addresses the changing direction of the party during the early period of New

Labour, and Abbott's paper which takes a longer view.²² Lastly, a benefit of conducting interviews is the participants themselves are an important source in establishing the networks in which these political actors moved and thereby identifying other actors.

In conjunction with the two main primary sources, a range of other primary sources will be utilised, including autobiographies, diaries and memoirs. As with elite interviews, these sources have an important contribution to make as the role of individuals is central to the strategic deliberations that take place during the formation of education policy and subsequently have a direct impact on the educational outcomes of white working-class boys. Similarly, the hermeneutic approach facilitates an in-depth study of the individual political actors involved through an agent-centred approach, which focuses on the understanding of their interpretation and meaning. Given that a decade has elapsed since the New Labour project was jettisoned from public office by the electorate, there has been sufficient time for a number of key political actors to make personal contributions to the literature. As with the use of other sources, a methodological strategy of triangulation will be adopted to ensure the available material is effectively utilised. This will be conducted by evaluating the sources, through comparing and contrasting separate individual accounts and alternative primary sources. This approach facilitates a more rigorous interpretation of sources, as it seeks to corroborate individual accounts and to a limited degree mitigates the risk of bias within such publications. Turning to each of the sources Gamble argues that there are distinct types of political memoir, including diaries and autobiographies under this broader heading.²³ The value of political diaries as evidence, Gamble contends, comes from the fact they are contemporary with events and that the material is an interpretation of events from the author's perspective at the time of writing.²⁴ In contrast, memoirs are most often produced subsequent to events, and are retrospective, presenting the reflections of an author. However, they impose a narrative and are selective in events and facts which justifies the author's actions and presents them as coherent and consistent.²⁵ A number of these benefits and pitfalls are similarly applicable to autobiographies. In terms of advantages, they provide an insight into an individual's attributes, such as their beliefs and values, and the motivations that drive them. In contrast, the same author may focus on their assessment of colleagues' performance, exaggerate their own role in events, or adopt a position which seeks to explicitly defend or critique individuals or events. Ultimately, Gamble contends the best approach is to

compare and contrast accounts of key decisions and events with contemporary works, and that these accounts often differ greatly as they rely on fundamentally different interpretations of political reality.²⁶

A significant contribution to this thesis will be made by secondary sources, most notably from academic publications, books and journal articles. There now exists a considerable amount of literature analysing and evaluating the New Labour era, its political actors and policies. Firstly, there are numerous publications covering the general history of New Labour, charting the modernisation of the party in opposition, its electoral triumph and public policy agenda. Secondly, there is extensive literature that charts the personal relationships between key players in the New Labour project, that can provide a more detailed account of political actor's motivations and how their actions influenced policy decision-making and outcomes. Thirdly, although the domestic policy agenda of New Labour has been of considerable interest to authors, there is a more limited collection of literature specifically considering education policy during this period.

While the methodological approach of this thesis is firmly qualitative and will broadly adopt a hermeneutical framework, there is an important place for the use of quantitative data. At the outset of designing a study, after having articulated a research problem, it is a matter of selecting the most appropriate and practicable methods that will facilitate the best results, and not simply applying a researcher's preferred methods.²⁷ The use of a mixed methods approach has become more acceptable in academic research with researchers conducting studies using a combination of techniques from both methodological traditions.²⁸ Authors have previously set out the notion that such methodological techniques are incompatible given their positivist and interpretivist underpinnings. However, in this instance, quantitative sources are complementary to the subject under investigation, the qualitative sources and will enhance the interpretation of political history with distinct benefits. Significantly, the inclusion of a quantitative source will enable a comparison with the qualitative data that is collected. This will be particularly useful in contrasting the actions of political actors and their policies against educational outcomes. The main source of quantitative data will be the Department for Education's (DfE) publication of an annual statistical release of educational data, including GCSE attainment. In utilising government statistics, published by the DfE and its successors,

this presents a valuable secondary source to evaluate the performance of the secondary education policy of the New Labour governments against their stated aims and the hypothesis of this thesis. There are several advantages to utilising quantitative data in this way. First, this is an annual and ongoing series of statistical publications concerning a specific collection of data. Second, the data provides a measurable and quantifiable data set against which to judge the impact of secondary education policy by tracking attainment. Third, the data collected by the DfE is statistically robust. This is due to the fact that the statistics are based on external examinations and are verified independently. In conjunction with this is the fact that the data is highly representative, as information is provided on nearly all pupils regardless of attainment. Fourth, the published data is broken down into appropriate categories including by gender, ethnicity and free school meal eligibility, facilitating comparisons between different salient demographics.

The thesis offers an historical account through the adoption of methodological framework of hermeneutics and a composite approach to data. As demonstrated above, a necessary precondition of providing a reliable account of a political actor's actions is an understanding of their beliefs and values. These two attributes directly shape an actor's behaviour, their interpretation of their own conduct and their decision-making. Together with a data collection strategy based on the triangulation of primary and secondary sources to corroborate interpretations and minimise inaccuracies. This composite approach to data collection will offer a historically substantive account and a greater degree of validity, achieved through a critical appraisal and comparison of primary and secondary sources.

¹ Bale, T. & Brivati, T. (eds.) *New Labour in Power: Precedents and Prospects* (London: Routledge, 2002).

² Whitty, G. 'Evaluating 'Blair's Educational Legacy?': some comments on the special issue of Oxford Review of Education', *Oxford Review of Education*, Vol. 35 (2) (2009). Pp. 267 – 280.

³ Sorensen, T. *Counselor: A Life at the Edge of History* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008) p. 140.

⁴ Lichtman, M. *Qualitative Research for the Social Sciences*, (Thousand Oaks, CA; Sage Publications, 2013). Pp. 7 – 10.

⁵ Kavanagh, D. 'Why Political Science Needs History', *Political Studies*, Vol. 39 (3), (Sept 1991). p. 482.

⁶ Hay, C. *Political Analysis: A Critical Introduction*, (London: Macmillan International Higher Education, 2002). Pp. 94 – 96.

⁷ Zimmerman, J. *Hermeneutics: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). Pp. 1 – 2.

⁸ MacIntyre, D. 'A mistake about causality in social science', in Laslett, P. & Runciman, W. G. (eds.) *Philosophy, Politics and Society*, Second Series, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962). Pp 48 – 70.

⁹ Ibid. p 52.

¹⁰ Ibid. p 56.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Hickson, K. *The 1976 IMF Crisis and British Politics*. (PhD Thesis: The University of Southampton, 2002). p. 6.

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- ¹³ MacIntyre, D. 'A mistake about causality in social science', in Laslett, P. & Runciman, W. G. (eds.) *Philosophy, Politics and Society*, Second Series, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962). p 60.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ Hickson, K. *The 1976 IMF Crisis and British Politics*. (PhD Thesis: The University of Southampton, 2002). Pp. 6 – 7.
- ¹⁶ MacIntyre, D. 'A mistake about causality in social science', in Laslett, P. & Runciman, W. G. (eds.) *Philosophy, Politics and Society*, Second Series, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962). Pp 60 – 63.
- ¹⁷ Stolz, S. *Alasdair MacIntyre, Rationality and Education: Against Education of Our Age*, (Cham: Springer, 2018). Pp. 22 – 23.
- ¹⁸ Richards, D. 'Elite Interviewing: Approaches and Pitfalls', *Politics*, Vol. 16 (3), (Sept 1996). Pp. 200 – 201.
- ¹⁹ Ibid. p. 200.
- ²⁰ Davies, P.H.J., 'Spies as Informants: Triangulation and the Interpretation of Elite Interview Data in the Study of the Intelligence and Security Services', *Politics*, Vol. 21 (1), (2001). Pp. 73 – 80.
- ²¹ Chitty, C. *New Labour and Secondary Education, 1994 – 2010* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). Pp. 71 – 72.
- ²² Abbott, I. 'Politics and education policy into practice: conversations with former Secretaries of State', *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, Vol. 47 (4), (2015). Pp. 334 – 349.
- ²³ Gamble, A. 'Political Memoirs', *Politics*, Vol. 14 (1), (1994). Pp. 35 – 36.
- ²⁴ Ibid. p. 36.
- ²⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁶ Ibid. p. 41.
- ²⁷ Mitchell, J. 'Qualitative research meets the ghost of Pythagoras', *Theory & Psychology*, Vol. 21 (2), (2011). p. 139.
- ²⁸ Lichtman, M. *Qualitative Research for the Social Sciences*, (Thousand Oaks, CA; Sage Publications, 2013). p. 6.

Chapter 2

The development of the Labour Party's secondary education policy: 1941 – 1994

The Labour Party's relationship with secondary education in the post-war period has been complex. At times, the issue has caused considerable intra-party rifts, within and between the parliamentary party, the leadership, and its thinkers. However, this did not prevent it from a single-minded pursuit of its settled policy when in government. In contrast, for the most part, its time in opposition was spent fundamentally reformulating its secondary education policy. This manifested itself with the continuation of the tripartite system by the governments of Clement Attlee, followed by a re-evaluation of policy, and the onset of comprehensivisation as the dominating force, in both principle and practice, of Labour's secondary education policy. This overarching aim remained in place until the mid-1970s, when a Labour government pre-empted the end of the post-war consensus in other areas of policy, by instituting a new agenda for secondary education policy that would set the agenda for the remainder of the 20th Century.

The chapter adopts a chronological approach to the issue of secondary education policy, as this allows for a detailed inspection of the most salient factors at any given point, from the party's involvement in the wartime coalition to the mid-1990s, as opposed to a more limited view of a single thematic subject. The chronology of Labour's policy is therefore established through aligning periods in government and opposition with appropriate factors that denote a change, either in policy, leadership or electoral fortunes. However, this is not a rigid criterion to be fulfilled, but a flexible frame of reference that aides in the understanding of relevant eras in the development of Labour's secondary education policy.

2.1 The Butler Act and Attlee Governments: 1941 – 1951

Amongst the literature that assesses the period during the Labour Party's participation in the wartime coalition government and the Attlee administrations in the immediate post-war era, there is a broad agreement on specific issues of secondary education policy, such as the views of Attlee's Ministers of Education on the organisation of secondary education. However, other

aspects including the Education Act (1944), also known as the Butler Act, generate more divergent opinions between authors.

Currently, the literature that addresses the Labour Party's secondary education policy during the Second World War and the Attlee governments adopts two approaches to evaluating the period. The first, such as Lawton, creates a simple dichotomy separating the time period into two distinct eras: during the war and post-war up to 1951.¹ Other authors, for example Chitty, utilise the Butler Act's status as a landmark piece of legislation to serve as an introduction to the whole post-war period.² However, there is a case to be made that both of these approaches are unsatisfactory to demarcate the distinct periods in the development of Labour's secondary education policy. As Labour's policy priorities for secondary education were the subject of internal party discussions from 1941 until the 1945 election, and with Attlee's government facing criticism from its own backbenchers on multilateral and common schools,^a it is important to account for the source of their policies during and immediately after the war, as well as for the divisions in opinion between party backbenchers and the Government frontbench. Lawton is mistaken to split this short period of time into two as the Attlee governments pursued secondary education policies that had been formulated during Labour's participation in Churchill's wartime administration. Similarly, in the case of the Chitty, although the Butler Act is a historically convenient place to begin to trace the post-war development of Labour's secondary education policy, it is a fundamental mistake to not account for the party's considerations during the war years and contribution to the Butler Act, as the Attlee governments' secondary education policy priorities cannot be understood without reference to these earlier deliberations.

There is general agreement across the literature that, by mid-1941, the Labour Party had turned its attention to post-war reconstruction. Significantly, by August of that year the Advisory Committee on Education (ACE) had formally become a sub-committee of the Party's

^a Within the literature, there is a degree of ambiguity regarding terminology of school types and would benefit from definition. The multilateral school would see the tripartite system (grammar, secondary modern and technical schools) accommodated on a single site. Proponents of the multilateral school accepted differentiation in children's intelligence and ability but argued the multilateral school would be more socially acceptable than separating children and would facilitate an easier transfer of children between the streams. The common school is a precursor of the comprehensive school, which would have seen all children regardless of ability be admitted.

Reconstruction Committee and focused specifically on reform of secondary education. However, it quickly became apparent that there were differing ideas within the Party as to which policy should be pursued, a theme that would endure throughout Attlee's remaining tenure at the helm of the Labour Party. This is where the consensus between the authors ends. Parkinson offers a concise summary of the issue when tracing the development of multilateralism in the party, noting that as early as April 1942 an ACE memo outlined divisions between members of the committee on the multilateral school and its interpretation of secondary education for all.³ While Lawton recognises that there were contrasting positions as early as 1942, he oversimplifies the views within the Party into two neat groups: supporters of a comprehensive education for all and those who saw post-war reforms as based on selection within a tripartite system. In comparison to the previous two authors, the most comprehensive account is offered by Barker, who concurs with Parkinson and contrasts with Lawton. Barker reaffirms Parkinson's summary of the divisions on the ACE. While both authors utilise primary source material in the form of the minutes of committee meetings, Barker sets out a fuller analysis with reference to the composition of the views of committee members.⁴ Barker goes on to expand on this, in contrast with Lawton, by identifying three distinct positions: opposition to common schools in any form; support for their introduction as an addition to the existing system; and support for common schools as the only kind of secondary school. Barker outlines the motives for these positions, as some supporters believed that multilateral schools were a device to make equality of opportunity a reality and others as a method to improve selection techniques for a variety of forms of education, without the finality of selection at age 11.⁵ Although the place of the multilateral school was contested within the Labour Party, it can be argued that the party adopted a pragmatic approach to secondary education policy during wartime deliberations in order to satisfy and hold the party together. This was illustrated by the attempts to accommodate the various views in resolutions at conference, notably in 1942, when a resolution proposed by the National Executive Committee (NEC) called for all secondary schools to be placed under the same regulations and to encourage the development of multilateral schools.⁶

The next step in Labour's journey to develop a secondary education policy for the post-war period was the party's reaction to the White Paper. Entitled *Educational Reconstruction* and published in 1943, it contained long held Labour ambitions such as the raising of the school

leaving age (ROSLA) to fifteen and the abolition of secondary school fees.⁷ It also included a description of a tripartite organisation of secondary education into three categories: grammar, technical and secondary modern schools. This was quickly followed by the publication of the Norwood Report⁸ which reinforced this notion and was the most recent contribution in a series of official commissions following the Hadow Report⁹ and Spens Report¹⁰ which advocated a bipartite and tripartite system respectively.

Lawton notes that Labour were generally supportive of the White Paper and rightly identifies the above provisions as victories for the Labour Party. However, he also asserts that, as there were divisions over the tripartite organisation of secondary education, the party failed to critique this issue in the White Paper. As for the Education Act itself, Lawton makes a distinct point of noting that the Act did not set out a tripartite system of organisation for secondary education. In contrast, Barker is more specific, noting that the wartime government's acceptance of the Norwood Report split Labour Party opinion; on the one hand the supporters of multilateral schools as a device for efficient selection and equality of opportunity had no issue in principle with the Act itself, whereas on the other hand those who supported common schools as the only form of secondary education found government policy unacceptable. Barker then proceeds to dismantle Lawton's argument by detailing how the Party's ACE worked to prevent the three prescribed forms of secondary education organisation contained within the White Paper from being reproduced in the Education Act when it was introduced in the House of Commons. This is of particular significance for two key reasons: firstly, the removal of the tripartite system made the Act palatable to some Labour MPs who supported multilateral schools, as this meant all secondary schools would come under the same regulations; and secondly, supporters of the multilateral school had utilised every avenue available to them to ensure the survival of their idea and to prevent the creation of any further barriers to its realisation. These wartime deliberations between the supporters and detractors of selection, the tripartite system and multilateral schools, played a significant role in clarifying the policies of secondary education that would satisfy much of the Party. They culminated in the leadership of the Labour Party adopting a secondary education policy in its manifesto for the 1945 general election, *Let Us Face the Future*, which stated that: "Labour will put that Act not merely into legal force but into practical effect, including raising the school leaving age to 16", and, "free secondary education for all".¹¹ However, while the multilateral school had lost

out to the imposition of the Butler Act, the idea retained supporters within the Labour Party. For instance, the 1945 annual conference called for all new schools to be built on multilateral lines, and with members of the NEC such as Alice Bacon noting that the executive favoured multilateral schools.¹² Throughout the wartime deliberations on secondary education policy what becomes evident is a consistent undercurrent of support for multilateral schools, and the supporters of them exploiting opportunities to further their policy preferences in an attempt to convince their colleagues and move the direction of party policy. Arguably it was the moment that the leadership committed to the full implementation of the Butler Act, without as much as a mention of multilateral schools in the manifesto, that the supporters of multilateral schools within the Labour Party became disillusioned and would diverge.

The place of the 1944 Education Act merits inclusion in two respects. First, it represents a watershed in education legislation and for decades following provided the framework for the governance of schools in England and Wales. Although the Act was greatly amended, subsequent governments pursued reform agendas within the structures set out by it, until it was replaced by the Education Act 1996 on the 1st November that year. Second, it can be considered a milestone in the development of the Labour Party's post-war secondary education policy, as it was both the manifestation of pre-war objectives and significantly influenced the subsequent intra-Party discourse in the post-war period. In the time since the passing of the Butler Act, it has become a contested piece of legislation and has provoked substantial discourse.

Beginning with Simon's assessment of the Act, he presents a strong and substantiated argument that considers many significant aspects in the Bill's formation and passage, as well as the political and social contexts. In short, he maintains that it was essentially a conservative measure, facilitated by a capable politician and civil servants committed to the same objectives who were aware of the direction of on-going social and political change.¹³ Simon outlines how the Board of Education's (BoE) most senior civil servants had the foresight to account for the direction of on-going political and social change, noting that if they did not consider this, any subsequent Labour government would seek advice to overhaul education from alternative sources. Simon's case is then prosecuted on the basis that, a "broad popular movement for social and educational change"¹⁴ had emerged during the Second World War,

which included a radical programme for the overhaul of the education system. This radical programme is then used as a measure to evaluate the resulting legislation. Through this framework, Simon reaches the conclusion that Butler's skilful political management and the utilisation of Whitehall, the Conservative Party was able to manage and satisfy the demands of the Labour Party, by making only minimal and necessary concessions. Simon's inclusion of the political context is notable, as this demonstrates the sources of pressure which created an environment conducive to social reform, such as a group of progressive Tories in the Conservative dominated House of Commons, the publication of the Beveridge Report, and polling data showing a Labour lead and Government by-election losses. Ultimately, Simon argues the legislation resulted in the maintaining and strengthening of selection and the elitist structure of secondary education, through the perpetuation and protection of the independent, direct grant and grammar schools.

Several authors share Simon's main thesis regarding the Act as an essentially conservative product and the theme of social and political change. A similar conclusion is shared by Jefferys, albeit he arrives via a different route, as he seeks to understand the relationship between war and social reform with regard to the Act.¹⁵ Jefferys determines the Act was an attempt to move with the wartime political trends and was a means to Conservative ends. Although, he makes a significant point when he suggests that Labour's inability to propose more fundamental changes can be attributed to the Party's readiness during the wartime government to accept Butler's proposed legislation, as it amounted to the implementation of the previous two decades of Labour's demands. Wallace, in his doctoral thesis, takes a more caustic view towards the Labour Party's role in the resulting Act, portraying the legislation as a defeat for the party.¹⁶ He attributes this to the fact that it did not set out any obligation for the organisation of secondary schools, and that questions around issues such as raising the school leaving age to sixteen, abolishing fees for direct grant schools and parity of conditions in secondary education were absent.¹⁷ Wallace supports Simon's view on political and social change in his article, which focuses on a narrow subject of the authorship on the Act,¹⁸ and reiterates the role of the BoE's role in composing the legislation. In contrast, Parkinson advances the argument that the Butler Act was the "final vindication" of the party's pre-war objectives, outlining how almost all of its major demands for reform were codified in the Act.¹⁹ Parkinson explicitly states that it was the culmination of a "generation's work and ambition",

and goes on to recognise that it shifted the debate to the structure of secondary education.²⁰ Bailey adopts a conciliatory view, arguing that the gains achieved by the Labour Party were “general but not inconsiderable” and were likely the limit of the possible advances given the necessity to compromise in a wartime coalition government.²¹

Simon’s claim that a radical programme for education was gathering support is contested by authors who highlight evidence which undermines this idea. Jefferys refutes Simon’s argument when he notes that a majority of the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) did not share the view that equality of opportunity could only be achieved by multilateral schooling, and that while the PLP were content with the Bill, their overarching aim was to ensure parity of quality in a varied system of secondary education. This view is further supported by Wallace, as he details the disharmony between Chuter Ede, Labour’s Parliamentary Secretary to the Board of Education, and his party colleagues, including members of the ACE, noted party intellectuals such as R. H. Tawney and Harold Laski, and proponents of the multilateral school.²² Furthermore, Wallace casts doubt on Simon’s claim surrounding the school leaving age, noting that senior Labour Party figures, including Attlee, Herbert Morrison, Ede and G. D. H. Cole did not ultimately use their influential positions to ensure the legislation would raise the school leaving age to sixteen, instead accepting fifteen.²³ Bailey also undermines Simon’s claim and reaffirms Wallace’s view, when he notes that Labour Ministers were put in a difficult position whereby they had to compromise, as there was not an internal party consensus on more fundamental reforms to education including equality of opportunity and the independent and multilateral schools.²⁴

The literature concerning the 1944 Education Act largely engages in a discourse surrounding two issues, the authorship of the Act and the social reform brought about by war. Every facet, from its inception, authorship, to content and legacy, has been uncovered by academics who have sought to comprehensively advance their perspective on these issues and many others.²⁵ While all of these features are significant in their own way, the question of whether the Act represented any kind of success for the Labour Party is the sole focus of few authors and is only addressed in short by others.²⁶ This is to the detriment of the literature, as there is little coherent dialogue between authors whereby they directly address another’s argument and challenge their assertions. Few authors dispute Simon’s statement that the Butler Act

essentially sustained the status quo, with minor modifications. This is despite the fact that, as previously set out, Simon overestimates the weight of the opinion within the Labour Party for more fundamental change to the education system during the wartime period. Nor does any author raise the fact that the Party had not reached a definitive view on independent, direct grant and grammar schools at this point in time, and would continue to struggle with the issue for several decades to come. Arguably one of the most important achievements of the Labour Party's role in the 1944 Education Act was the removal of a clause which prescribed the organisation of secondary education. However, it is not given the significance it merits. Although Wallace and Barker detail its removal, with the former crediting Ede and the latter the Party's ACE, other authors do not account for the impact if the original legislation had set out the structure of secondary education.²⁷ If this provision had passed into law, there would have been no option to experiment with multilateral schools and it would have delayed Harold Wilson's comprehensive reforms until after the 1966 general election. The passing of the Bill can be interpreted as *realpolitik* in action: the dominant political party in a coalition government, holding over 200 seats more than their junior partner despite losing over 20 by-elections during the ten-year parliament, and enacting the reforms they deemed appropriate.

Within the literature there is a discernible shift in interpretation of the Bill, as argued by S. J. D. Green in the introduction to his article.²⁸ A majority of material published during the post-war period initially hailed the Act as a progressive step forward. However, this has since given way to a more stringent critique. Green then offers a broader analysis, attributing this shift to an *eisegetical* reading of history, in which hindsight and the concerns of the present cast an unfavourable light on the actions of the past. This line of argument carries some credibility, as those authors publishing in the short term, such as Parkinson, offer a more balanced assessment of the legislation and Labour's role. In contrast, the fullest critiques of the 1944 Education Act, which are published shortly after the 1979 general election and the Labour leadership of Michael Foot, a possible impact of a more partisan political atmosphere. On reflection, the 1944 Education Act resulted in an undeniable improvement to secondary education and should therefore be considered an achievement by a Labour Party within the confines of a coalition government. As outlined by authors, the Act represented a milestone in the Labour Party's mission to re-build the country in a fairer way, but it also fell short of the aspirations of those more radical elements.

From the outset of Attlee's time as Prime Minister, several authors identify a divide within the Labour Party between the Government frontbench and a small group of Labour MPs, mostly former teachers, who supported multilateral schools as the main form of secondary education and consistently pressured, debated and openly critiqued government policy.²⁹ The group utilised all avenues available to them, and from as early as March 1946 were attacking government policy in debates from the floor of the House of Commons,³⁰ criticising the endorsement of the tripartite system in *The Nation's Schools*.³¹ Similarly, at the annual party conference in June that year, a motion critical of government policy was passed, despite protests from Minister of Education Ellen Wilkinson. By July, Wilkinson had conceded that a restatement of government policy was required, and this was published by her successor George Tomlinson in June 1947.³²

As Lawton and Chitty argue, successive Ministers of Education and the Prime Minister himself, were committed to the full implementation of the Butler Act and were not interested in a re-organisation of secondary education. They attribute this to two key causes: that those individuals were a successful product of the tripartite system, and they had a sincerely held belief that different levels of ability should be catered for via different models of school. In the first instance, the personal biographies of Attlee and Wilkinson demonstrate the administration's commitment to the education system. Attlee's fondness for his former school, Haileybury is well known and Wilkinson noted of her own educational journey that, "I had to fight my own way through to the University",³³ although her successor, George Tomlinson, who only received an elementary education also supported the status quo, summarised his view as one of wanting to provide opportunities to children from a similar background to himself that he did not have.³⁴ This is a rare instance of consensus among authors across the literature, with Barker, Fenwick³⁵ and Rubinstein³⁶ raising a similar point regarding the educational biographies of the administration's leadership in regard to their education policy, which embraced the Butler Act and rejected multilateral schools. In the latter case, authors including Chitty and Barker reach a similar conclusion that Attlee's Government and his ministers were earnest believers in the tripartite system, who were arguing for 'equality with diversity',³⁷ in the belief that offering variation in the formal organisation of education would achieve a form of greater equality. However, it is arguable that the Labour Party's conception

of equality at this point in time simply could not account for the disparity in education, as demonstrated by Wilkinson at Labour Party Conference in 1946 when she said: “Free milk will be provided in Horton and Shoreditch, in Eton and Harrow. What more social equality can you have than that?”³⁸ and “Education must be varied, but if equality of facilities were achieved, everything else would follow.”³⁹ Similarly, Wilkinson’s successor Tomlinson is noted by his biographer, Fred Blackburn, to have said in commenting on the place of independent schools in the education system, “I am all for variety, especially in the field of education.”⁴⁰ Rubinstein and Parkinson note this issue, the former in passing when setting out Wilkinson’s educational biography, stating that the Minister’s interpretation of equality was related to competition instead of access,⁴¹ and the latter in setting out the Minister’s belief in parity of conditions.⁴² This conveys the idea that there was a fundamentally different understanding of the kind of equality and social progress that the Labour Party was pursuing, namely a narrower interpretation of the concept that did not yet extend to the formulation and delivery of education and was only enhancing the façade of education and not its substantive elements.

Lastly, a line of argument advanced by Lawton and to a lesser degree Chitty is that as Education Minister, Wilkinson was simply following the status quo and was influenced by the conservative culture of the Ministry of Education towards policy. Lawton specifically notes that, “The Minister was clearly led in the direction of tripartite policy by her officials.”⁴³, while Chitty adds that she followed the orthodoxy of the ministry to commit to the tripartite system and reject the alternatives.⁴⁴ There is limited evidence to support the view of the former two authors, who are essentially adopting a structuralist view and seek to undermine Wilkinson’s agency and autonomy. In comparison, Rubinstein offers a more nuanced view, outlining three reasons for the failure to implement comprehensive education, including: the backgrounds of Labour Ministers, the Labour Movement and the Ministry of Education’s civil servants. In explaining Wilkinson’s role, he notes that political leadership inhibited Local Education Authorities (LEAs) who had planned a degree of multilateral schools, and Wilkinson’s views were consistent across speeches, ministry publications and circulars. However, there are two significant weaknesses in Lawton and Chitty’s argument. Firstly, there is a strong case for the notion that Wilkinson and the leadership of the then recently established ministry both had an interest in maintaining the tripartite policy. Wilkinson’s overarching priority was Labour’s manifesto commitment of full implementation of the Butler Act, and the ministry did not have

the capacity to work up a wholesale reorganisation of secondary education, whilst simultaneously delivering a huge programme in education including increasing the school leaving age to 15 (168,000 extra pupils on school rolls), rebuilding of schools (7000 classrooms), and the emergency teacher training programme (35,000 new teachers) amongst others.⁴⁵ Secondly, a notable oversight is the respective time spent in office by each minister. Wilkinson was in office for the initial 18 months of the first Attlee administration, while her successor Tomlinson occupied the same role for close to five years until Labour's defeat in October 1951. However, his time is not evaluated as having been an opportunity for the reorganisation of secondary education on comprehensive lines.

An alternative view is presented by Simon, who alleges that Attlee's ministers failed to reorganise the system of secondary education due to a lack of political will, citing the failure to implement the 1942 party conference resolution calling for all secondary schools to be placed under the same regulations and to encourage the development of multilateral schools.⁴⁶ Firstly, Simon mistakes the ministers focus on other policy priorities, such as ROSLA, as a lack of political will instead of understanding it as a choice and expression of agency. Billy Hughes, Wilkinson's Parliamentary Private Secretary, notes that his first act in this role was to fulfil a civil service request for a briefing on Labour's education policy. The response from Labour Headquarters and the Trade Union Congress is summarised as: "Get on with implementing the Act."⁴⁷ This is exactly what Wilkinson and Tomlinson did, by arguing for the ROSLA and ensuring a large-scale rebuilding programme. Simon also fails to appreciate the disparity between a resolution being passed by Labour Party conference, during its participation in a coalition government, and statute. While the legislation was already in place, the resolution passed at party conference was not as certain a statement of the direction of policy as Simon believes it to be, and while party conference may be an important consideration for a Labour leader in opposition, a Labour Prime Minister's first consideration is the British national interest. As set out above, in order to satisfy and hold the party together, the leadership pursued a pragmatic approach to party management, including policy discussions. One example of this is the carefully worded resolution which sought to accommodate the various views on secondary education policy within the party at that time.

2.2 From Tripartite to Comprehensivisation: 1951 – 1964

Following Labour's return to opposition after the 1951 general election, the debate on the party's secondary education policy was pursued with new interest and would, over the course of thirteen years, lead to the implementation of a policy of reorganising secondary education on comprehensive lines. Within the literature there are two periods in which policy developed: the remainder of Attlee's leadership, and Hugh Gaitskell's time as leader. During the latter period, three clearly defined factors shaped the direction of the party's secondary education policy: the dominant place of revisionism, the leadership of Gaitskell and the policy review he oversaw. The influence of these three is pivotal to understanding the party's approach to reforms of the education system, in opposition and as a prelude to Wilson's governments.

During Attlee's short spell as opposition leader, there is a broad consensus amongst authors that Labour's internal thinking on the subject of secondary education policy was largely led by the NEC, particularly Alice Bacon, and was greatly influenced by several sources including MPs and the trade union movement. Fenwick explores the stages of Labour's internal thinking on the subject, arguing the Labour leadership offered no commitment on secondary reorganisation in the 1950 or 1951 general elections. Instead, the NEC published *A Policy for Secondary Education* in June 1951, expressing a belief in comprehensive education.⁴⁸ Fenwick argues that by 1953, the party's policy still lacked clarity, and while its commitment became stronger, it still needed to turn this into a tangible policy. This arrived in 1953 in the document *Challenge to Britain*.⁴⁹ Fenwick highlights the significant criticism the document received from MPs including Michael Stewart, and the trade union movement, specifically the National Association of Labour Teachers (NALT). Fenwick details a significant development at party conference 1953, where NALT proposed two amendments to the education section of the document, insisting on retaining the commitment to comprehensive education with an immediate reorganisation utilising existing buildings; and, an immediate abolition of independent schools.⁵⁰ In response, the NEC agreed to revise the education section on the basis of the NALT amendments.

This is an account of events and policy development that is recognised by other authors including Parkinson and Rao. Parkinson corroborates Fenwick's account on all significant

points including Bacon and NALT's role, and offers further detail, noting that party policy of comprehensive education was confirmed by Alice Bacon, on behalf of the NEC, at Party conference in 1952. Parkinson also ascribes multiple motivations to Bacon and the NEC to undertake further work on comprehensive education, being chiefly that Bacon believed the passage of time diminished the chances of comprehensive education and the entrenched tripartite system, and to maintain momentum in policy development.⁵¹ Similarly, Rao recognises the NEC's leading role in policy development from 1951 onwards, and the influential role occupied by NALT in clarifying the Party's stated policy in 1953.⁵² Whilst there is a clear consensus across the literature on the development of policy and pertinent documents from these few years, the importance of the involvement of the NEC and NALT take on particular significance when Donnelly highlights that Labour's policy programme at the 1955 election was essentially that set out by the 1953 party conference, a detail that goes unrecognised by other authors.⁵³ Although there is agreement that Labour's commitment to comprehensivisation was led by the NEC, trade unions and MPs, few have considered that this vacuum in policymaking could only be exploited due to Attlee's lack of leadership in education policy and domestic affairs more widely, allowing stakeholders within and without the Labour Party to influence the shape of policy. This reflected Attlee's priority of foreign affairs, his style and view of leadership, and fatigue after ten years in government and approaching twenty years as party leader.

Within the literature, there is a consensus among authors that during the early 1950s revisionism was gaining traction and from the outset of Gaitskell's leadership was the rationale for the Labour Party's policies. As set out by Donnelly, whose meticulous account of Labour's time in opposition details the serious work undertaken by the party to reassess and identify priorities for a future administration, the publication of several revisionists works provided an intellectual underpinning for the party's new direction. Donnelly highlights publications throughout this period of opposition, including the Fabian Society's *New Fabian Essays*⁵⁴ in 1952, followed by Rodgers' *About Equality*⁵⁵ in 1954, in 1956 Strachey's *Contemporary Capitalism*⁵⁶ and Crosland's *The Future of Socialism*⁵⁷, and in 1962 *The Conservative Enemy*.⁵⁸ As set out above, there are numerous revisionist publications addressing the direction of the Labour Party. However, given the broader importance of Crosland's work to Labour Party

thinking, its wide-ranging nature and that its author would later implement reforms to education, it merits further study.

There is a broad consensus amongst the literature, with the majority of authors agreeing that Crosland's thesis on capitalism, social inequality and the pursuit of a comprehensive education system was highly influential to Labour Party thought and policy. Donnelly illustrates the strength of Crosland's influence on party policy by highlighting seven of nine major policy statements published by the NEC over two years, which were heavily influenced by his work.⁵⁹ Francis reaffirms Donnelly's assessment, arguing that Crosland's thesis was perceived as the ideological underpinning of Gaitskell's revisionism.⁶⁰ Jeffreys concurs with both Donnelly and Francis, noting that by 1956 Crosland's influence in party committee reports was evident.⁶¹

However, a recurrent theme amongst authors is criticism of his assumptions regarding grammar and independent schools. In evaluating Anthony Crosland's *The Future of Socialism*, Lawton's strongest claims are laid out clearly: that Crosland's work on education was his weakest, as he criticised the status quo without having set out a clear alternative, and that this would later effect Labour's record in government.⁶² This is an allegation Lawton repeats in another publication, similarly claiming that Crosland's thinking on education was superficial and inconsistent, contrasting his writing on grammar schools with his later infamous expletive laden outburst.⁶³ He also recognises Crosland's acknowledgement that it would be impossible to have grammar and comprehensive schools in the same location, but develops this as a further point of critique as Crosland fails to grasp the greater danger of abolishing grammars whilst independent schools remained untouched. Whilst Lawton offers a strong argument on the inconsistencies of Crosland's political thought, the remainder of his critique of Crosland is much weaker, complaining that Crosland's work does not conform to what, in Lawton's view, is expected of a socialist view and theory of education; and that Crosland lacked a general knowledge about the subject of education.⁶⁴ However, the former simply reveals the judgement and commitments of the author, while the latter is a criticism that could be made of most politicians, as very few are specialists in their department's field on arrival in ministerial office.

Rao broadly agrees with Lawton, who portrays Crosland and the revisionists as a force for moderation in the party's debate on education policy, highlighting a passage in his work that proposes grammar schools of academic quality remain and links their fate to that of secondary moderns.⁶⁵ A critique made of Crosland at the time is highlighted by Nuttall, who quotes Bryan Magee, who commented that although *The Future of Socialism* places great emphasis on education, it composes only 20 of 529 pages, and that this is repeated in *The Conservative Enemy*.⁶⁶ Nuttall validates this analysis, arguing that the focus of Crosland's work was primarily on economics, as was the Labour Party's throughout the 1950s and 1960s.⁶⁷ In his article, Kogan advances a critical evaluation of Crosland's writings. Although initially praising Crosland's socio-economic analysis, he concludes that Crosland's deductions on grammar schools' divisive power were based on *a priori* findings and crucially lacked empirical insight and failed to recognise the opportunities for a minority from working class backgrounds.⁶⁸ Although the relevant strengths of these critiques can be questioned, there are few authors who have attempted to critically evaluate Crosland's thinking on the role of grammar schools in a reformed education system.⁶⁹

The second educational issue that receives critical evaluation by several authors is Crosland's thinking on independent schools, which he principally articulated in *The Future of Socialism* and *The Conservative Enemy*,⁷⁰ and which many authors interpret as a clash of principles. Hillman briefly highlights the shifting basis behind Crosland's proposals for reform, from a meritocratic standpoint in 1956 to an egalitarian standpoint in 1962, with the former determining that all places should be based on selection while the latter decides place should be occupied by choice.⁷¹ However, Hillman is mistaken as in Crosland's concluding remarks in 1956 he ultimately decides that places at the reformed independent schools should go to a wide selection of society and not be allocated only to the most intelligent.⁷² This shift to a social impetus for reform of the independent schools led from one conflict of principles to another.

In comparison to Hillman, Collins provides a stronger critique, identifying a clash between equality and freedom as the primary cause of difficulties in reforming the independent schools, and considers Crosland's attempts to balance the two values in his proposals. Firstly, Collins notes that Crosland's argument that independent schools should permit entrance

based on free choice alone, specifically to those who desire or are suitable for such an education, and not merit, would only attract the social classes which already attend those schools. Collins draws attention to Crosland's attempt to pre-empt this line of critique by suggesting that independent schools could serve a wider educational purpose, which he disputes as such an arrangement would infringe on the private liberty of individuals to spend their income however they choose and that this policy is no different to abolition. On equality of opportunity in education, Collins challenges how Crosland would achieve his strong interpretation of equality whilst refusing to utilise means which are necessarily illiberal, such as abolition which he deliberately rejected.⁷³ This tension within revisionist thought is similarly identified by Lawton, who notes that Crosland's values were in conflict over independent schools, but offers no further substantiated analysis other than noting that Crosland had not thought through a plan for regulating the education market,⁷⁴ and that the choice between social justice or a narrow definition of individual liberty is a question of priorities.⁷⁵

In the development of Labour's secondary education policy while in opposition, there is a consensus that Crosland made a significant contribution to the case for comprehensive education by offering an intellectual case to underpin the idea.⁷⁶ In comparison, there is an inadequate attempt in the literature to evaluate Crosland's thinking on grammar and independent schools, and also suffers from a lack of serious analysis. Specifically, few authors attempt to dismantle Crosland's arguments on grammar schools, and those that offer an analysis do not develop it further, lack examples or simply quote Crosland's most well-known remarks.⁷⁷ A more substantive criticism would be, for instance, that Crosland acknowledges that the middle class are overrepresented in grammars but proposes to retain the schools until such a time that conditions allow secondary moderns to be converted into comprehensives. This proposal fails to detail a time frame for conversion of secondary modern and grammar schools; how these conditions would be met; and whether measures to mitigate social stratification will be implemented in the intervening period. In contrast, the material covering Crosland's proposals on independent schools is slightly stronger, particularly a notable contribution made by Collins, but is overall still weak given the lack of discourse on the subject and discussion between writers. The majority of the literature focuses on the proposals made by Crosland and the impact of these in both practical terms and on the values

of individual liberty and equality. Lawton offers a different perspective, arguing that Crosland offers an interpretation of liberty that is narrow and restrictive, but fails to set out an alternative.

The second major contributing factor which influenced the shape of the party's secondary education policy during this period of opposition was Gaitskell's leadership and the domestic policy review he oversaw. Gaitskell conducted the policy review with the aim of building a policy programme that would reflect his revisionist approach. This encompassed Labour's ideas on the reorganisation of secondary education and sought to resolve the conflict in order to unite the party behind an agreed policy. Authors broadly agree that tensions were manifested within the party's secondary education policy discourse with regard to comprehensivisation and the place of grammar and independent schools within the education system.⁷⁸ Although the party had produced other concrete ideas on educational matters, for instance, there was a settled policy on the abolition of the eleven plus, the party's policy on secondary education still lacked clarity.

Across the literature, there are detailed, and authoritative accounts offered by multiple authors as to the development of policy within the framework of the policy review. An outline of Gaitskell's role in the Labour Party's policy review, conducted from 1956 to 1958, and the formal policy making framework is set out by Donnelly in his doctoral thesis.⁷⁹ Utilising primary source material and interviews with senior party figures, Donnelly establishes the centralised nature of the policy review, with the leadership controlling the process to ensure the eventual policy programme reflected their revisionist views. This was further reinforced by Gaitskell taking a pro-active role, chairing the Home Policy Committee and participating in study groups. Significantly, Donnelly outlines Gaitskell's role in *Towards Equality*,⁸⁰ the first NEC policy statement to be produced, which set out the socio-economic causes of inequality and recognised the education system as the most significant source, and which he spoke on behalf of the NEC at the annual conference where it was adopted.⁸¹ Despite the compelling evidence of Gaitskell's leadership role in the party's domestic policy review, Williams' definitive biography makes few mentions of education policy⁸² or the policy review.⁸³ However, this could be due to more pressing issues throughout this period which took priority, such as foreign and defence policy.

It is clear within the literature, that the Labour Party's stated policy under Gaitskell's leadership would reflect his long-held views on the structure of secondary organisation and the place of grammar and independent schools. Ellison traces the change in Gaitskell's thinking on grammar and independent schools in relation to the leader's values. In respect of the former, Ellison argues that Gaitskell's view was a liberal meritocratic interpretation of equality of opportunity which is reflected by comments throughout the decade regarding preservation of the grammar tradition whilst supporting comprehensivisation.⁸⁴ On independent schools, Ellison argues that Gaitskell's thinking further demonstrates his belief in a more limited equality of opportunity.⁸⁵ Initially Gaitskell believed strengthening the state sector would lead to the erosion of independent schools, before modifying his view that independent schools should be required to provide a percentage of free places that should then be allocated on merit.⁸⁶ As demonstrated by Williams⁸⁷ and Reeves⁸⁸ who both comment that his commitment to equality was demonstrated through the choice of subject for his speech as Shadow Chancellor, on taxation and independent schools to the 1953 party conference. Parkinson⁸⁹ and Collins⁹⁰ highlight Gaitskell's comment in the same speech, where in response to an amendment which called for all independent schools to be closed, he argued the party should avoid fostering a reputation for abolition and set out his view of meritocratic reforms outlined above. Reisman demonstrates that independent schools would be an issue that continued to cause Gaitskell's personal values of liberty and equality to come into conflict.⁹¹

There is broad consensus between authors regarding the significance of *Learning to Live* as the culmination of Labour's policy discourse on comprehensive education. However, few authors have directly addressed the education policy group's attempt to resolve the tensions over the issue of grammar and independent schools, albeit they do highlight the range of views present within the party. McCulloch details how a number of his colleagues have failed to address the work of the education study group at all, including Lawton, Rao and Fenwick. However, he does not explore the study groups' attempt to address the grammar and independent schools issue that had eluded the Labour Party in the post-war period.⁹² Instead, McCulloch's insights reveal both the breadth of the debate within the PLP over the structure of secondary education and that these issues did not always fit neatly to factional lines. This

is an important distinction, as a broad range of views have been present from the beginning of Labour's post-war considerations of secondary education and cross narrow factional lines, a view that is supported by Barker who outlines that there were at least three different views during the Attlee administrations.⁹³ This extended to Michael Stewart, who McCulloch notes believed Labour's education policy "should emphasise opportunity for able children rather than a purely egalitarian approach."⁹⁴ Chitty highlights the comments of two influential Labour MPs: a diary entry from Richard Crossman in 1953, who reflects on his belief that there was a palpable attachment to grammar schools amongst party conference delegates,⁹⁵ while five years later Emanuel Shinwell argued in *The Times* that the grammar schools offered working class boys a route to higher education and a better job.⁹⁶ Chitty also points to evidence that Labour understood the attitudes within working-class and middle-class communities towards grammar schools which were held in high esteem due to them offering a more substantial secondary education. Parkinson⁹⁷ and Rao⁹⁸ both concur with Chitty, utilising the same reference to Shinwell as a representative of wider party concerns with education, and pointing to Roy Jenkins', *The Labour Case*,⁹⁹ published just before the 1959 general election and advocated that grammar schools should be preserved as a link between the private and state sectors.

On the specific issue of grammar and independent schools within the composition of *Learning to Live*, several authors offer their insights within the literature and there is a shared view amongst them. Firstly, Parkinson highlights that the education study group has specifically considered whether the Party could continue to hold an ambiguous policy in relation to grammar schools, and if this was not possible, to understand how a statement regarding the possible reform of grammar schools could impact upon party members and the electorate.¹⁰⁰ On its publication, Parkinson argues that the policy statement tried to reconcile the two points of view present by offering a compromise, namely that comprehensive education would mean an end to grammar schools, but that the most important aspects would be retained and transformed.¹⁰¹

McCulloch concurs with Parkinson and presents a strong case, proposing that it was the combination of the 1955 election defeat, the subsequent election of Gaitskell as leader and his revisionism that addressed the tensions within Labour's policy.¹⁰² McCulloch sets out how

Gaitskell achieved this, by first commissioning an education policy review which produced *Learning to Live*; adopting the Party's position of opportunity for all in education; and that the comprehensive schools would spread the grammar school tradition, rather than undermine it.¹⁰³ To further emphasise the latter point McCulloch utilises a speech given by Gaitskell as his primary source material, where he summarised his position succinctly in the phrase "a grammar school education for all".¹⁰⁴ This is supported by Chitty's conclusions, as Gaitskell's approach to education policy resolved the tension, as although comprehensivisation would lead to the downfall of grammars, their essential feature and ethos would be spread to all schools.¹⁰⁵ It is also notable that Chitty, who usually takes a more critical view of the educational efforts of Labour during this period, acknowledges the difficult work undertaken by Labour to produce a fundamental change in its secondary education policy through its policy publications, but notes that although Labour edged closer to an agreed position, the party was still disunited throughout the majority of its time in opposition.¹⁰⁶ In comparison to colleagues, Rao's assessment is more critical, outlining the ambiguity in the party's policy. First, that comprehensives were preferred but legislation to implement the reform was rejected. Second, that many in the party were unsure of comprehensives and wanted to retain grammars. Third, that Gaitskell's phrase merely papered over the cracks.¹⁰⁷ In contrast, Lawton's analysis of Labour's time in opposition during this period is based primarily on dissatisfaction, arguing that the Party did little to develop its ideas on education.¹⁰⁸ Lawton fails to critically engage with other authors and the primary source material that attests to the seriousness of the internal discourse within the Labour Party and the resulting changes to its secondary education policy, as illustrated by the 1959 and 1964 general election manifestoes.

Similarly, Fenwick explores the stages of Labour's internal thinking on the subject, tracing it from their immediate return to opposition up to 1958's *Learning to Live*. However, juxtaposed to Parkinson, McCulloch and Chitty, Fenwick takes a much broader view, pointing to a number of factors that were contributing to the changing nature of the educational landscape, from the efforts of committed supporters of comprehensives such as the NALT, the favourable publicity achieved by comprehensive experimentation in several local authorities around England, the developments in ideas on education, both politically and non-political, as well as the alteration of Labour Party policy.¹⁰⁹ Although Fenwick recognises both Gaitskell's revisionism as uniting the party on a national level behind its education policy and as being

empathetic with advocates of comprehensivisation, he concludes that ultimately the impetus for Labour's shift in secondary education policy, which was initially rejected by the party leadership, came from below and successfully pressured the leadership into adopting the policy.¹¹⁰

While Fenwick's analysis on the broader influences of Labour's secondary education policy does carry some merit, there is insufficient weight given to Gaitskell's role as leader. Given that his revisionist approach shaped the Labour Party, its future and how it responded to public policy challenges, the election of any other candidate during the Labour leadership elections of 1955, 1960 and 1961 could have potentially derailed the Party's movement towards accepting comprehensivisation. Perhaps Gaitskell's most important achievement as leader was his lasting impact on both policy and the electoral fortunes of the Labour Party, as opinion polls throughout 1963 showed a Labour victory within sight, and education policy of comprehensive reorganisation was retained in the 1964 general election manifesto and was adopted by Wilson's government as part of a wider agenda of national renewal, as demonstrated by his 'white heat' speech in Scarborough,¹¹¹ that would later influence Circular 10/65.

Throughout the literature authors have intently focused on aspects of Labour's efforts to develop a coherent policy that would be palatable to the party and the public, such as policy documents, internal party discourse and local authority plans. However, it is notable that there are few references to the three general election manifestos produced in this time frame, which succinctly articulated the Party's position on a range of educational issues. This included the organisation of secondary education, setting out in 1955 that: "we shall encourage comprehensive secondary schooling",¹¹² followed in 1959 by: "Local authorities will have the right to decide how best to apply the comprehensive principle",¹¹³ before reaffirming this commitment in 1964 to reorganise secondary education on comprehensive lines.¹¹⁴ These documents illustrate that, despite the internal conversations Labour was engaged in throughout the 1950s, the party's public policy offering at two consecutive general elections essentially remained unchanged, and only after two consecutive defeats, did Labour set about substantively changing its secondary education policy. Furthermore, while there is a significant amount of prominent literature dedicated to the deliberations within Labour over

the re-organisation of secondary education, there is little attention devoted to evaluating other issues within secondary education itself, albeit authors do explore topics including local authority plans and the curriculum. For instance, while Labour's position in relation to grammar schools was still unclear at this point, the party had committed in both of its previous manifestoes during the mid and late 1950s to abolishing the eleven plus examination. This demonstrates that, while Labour set about seriously reformulating policy, the party chose to address the issues where agreement could be reached, in contrast to the more difficult issues of the grammar and independent schools which had not been given full consideration. This lack of adequate preparation in policy formulation in opposition, would be borne out by their actions in government.

The literature assessing the development of Labour's secondary education policy during the latter stages of Attlee's leadership offers a strong evaluation, portraying the chaotic and directionless development of policy, and analysing the actions of the NEC and trade unions who played a large role in policymaking given the leader's absence. Potentially, Attlee's greatest contribution to the Labour Party's secondary education policy in opposition was the establishment of the contemporary Shadow cabinet system, which provided subsequent leaders with an effective tool for leading and influencing internal party discourse and critiquing government policy. In comparison, the literature assessing the remainder of the period from 1955 to 1964 presents a strong case for the influence of Gaitskell, Crosland and their revisionism as the major forces in developing secondary education policy. However, on grammar schools, the literature struggles to adequately evaluate the party's thinking, offering only general analysis with few specific or detailed criticisms. In contrast, the critique of independent schools is more robust, challenging assumptions and attempting to reconcile principles with practicalities.

The most fertile area for critique is the conflict between personal freedom and equality, and the formulation of a secondary education policy that would reduce social inequality. As noted by both McCulloch¹¹⁵ and Favretto,¹¹⁶ the precedence given to individual liberty by revisionists, alongside or even ahead of equality, made the Labour Party's task of developing a coherent secondary education policy which reflected its values and embodied its aims, conflicted from the outset. This period of policy development takes on greater significance

when reviewed with Wilson's electoral success, which ensured these policies were pursued up to 1979 after being developed between 1956 and 1958, and his government's policies, specifically the implementation of Circular 10/65 and the decision to take no action following the publication of the first Newsome Report by the Public Schools Commission¹¹⁷ as recorded by the Cabinet's diarists.¹¹⁸

2.3 Circular 10/65 to Ruskin College Speech: 1965 to 1979

After Labour's election victory in October 1964, there were significant decisions taken on the reorganisation of secondary education within the first six months of Wilson's government, the most notable being the phrasing of Circular 10/65.¹¹⁹ There is a considerable discourse on both the decision to issue Circular 10/65 and its content, through which Labour intended to implement their secondary education policy.

McCulloch highlights that within Michael Stewart's autobiography,¹²⁰ he notes how in preparation for submission of his first cabinet paper on the comprehensive principle and options for its implementation, he relied on the *Learning to Live* report for which he had been principal author and prepared under Gaitskell's leadership.¹²¹ McCulloch conveys how this impacted the decision-making process of Circular 10/65 by quoting correspondence between Norman Morris, a member of the 1958 group that produced *Learning to Live*, and Brian Simon, in which Morris sets out that, firstly, Michael Stewart utilised the report as a plan upon being appointed as Secretary of State for Education and Science.¹²² Morris notes that the decision to 'request' rather than 'require' LEAs to submit plans for the reorganisation of secondary education was aligned with the strategy envisaged in the 1958 document, and that the final decision on wording was merely tactical.¹²³ Martin offers a contrasting view based on the autobiography of Edward Short. A contemporary of Stewart, who attended the Cabinet meeting where the paper on the issue of comprehensivisation was presented, he subsequently wrote that the Cabinet made the decision that a circular, which set out the case for comprehensive schools, should be sent to local authorities and ask for their co-operation.¹²⁴

In terms of Crosland's decision-making during his role as Education Secretary, Martin argues that he wanted this systemic change to be voluntary and through agreement, rather than

compulsion, hence his decision to opt to 'request' rather than 'require' plans from local authorities.¹²⁵ Fenwick supports and corroborates this view with two pieces of evidence: first, Crosland's replies during a session of Education and Science questions in the Commons where he sets out his opposition to compulsion; and second, an article in *The Times* in April which detailed the Cabinet's reluctance to force comprehensivisation, and would prefer cooperation with all those concerned.¹²⁶ Susan Crosland's biography of her husband offers further support to this line of thought, when she writes that; "it was fundamental to his view of democracy that reform would 'stick' better *if* it could be achieved voluntarily."¹²⁷ This offers a direct insight into Crosland's thinking in private and a more personal explanation for his decision on the wording of the circular. Sumner similarly attributes Crosland's own belief in co-operation, rather than coercion, as being in part responsible for the choice of wording, alongside a cabinet who were unsure of comprehensivisation, especially at the cost of grammars.¹²⁸ In contrast, Marsden adopts a cynical critique, arguing that Labour lacked a policy and sought support from the Department of Education and Science (DES) on the wording of the circular, and that Crosland hoped gradual implementation would prevent a hostile reaction.¹²⁹ However, this is a peripheral view that is not shared by any other author.

Lastly, Chitty attempts to uncover Crosland's decision-making by analysing an interview conducted by Maurice Kogan with the former minister in 1971.¹³⁰ Chitty identifies three contributing factors to his decision: first, Crosland highlights his meetings with the Association of Education Committees and his own sense of the feeling amongst local authorities had both been strong influences on his decision over the choice of wording.¹³¹ Second, during the interview Crosland notes that a majority of local authorities were both controlled by Labour and sympathetic to the policy, as were some Conservative councils.¹³² Lastly, Chitty argues that this was also a decision based on the fact that LEAs held superior knowledge of their own locality and the expertise to tailor to their needs, as well as Crosland's own department being over stretched.¹³³ These arguments are complemented by McCulloch and Lawton, who attempt to assess the decision not to legislate for secondary reorganisation. The former notes that Secretary of State for Education and Science, Michael Stewart, opened a speech in the House of Commons by quoting from *Learning to Live* that the Government would not amend the 1944 Education Act.¹³⁴ Similarly, Lawton highlights a number of factors which influenced the decision not to legislate: firstly, Stewart had set out that the Government's policy was of

willing cooperation between partners; secondly, that reasonable progress amongst local authorities in planning for comprehensive schools as having been made on a voluntary basis; and lastly, that Crosland agreed with Stewart's earlier decision not to legislate.¹³⁵ As demonstrated, there is little consensus between authors outside of the established facts, with each providing their own narrow analysis, focusing overwhelmingly on a few elite actors, in an attempt to determine the crucial influence on the decision regarding the precise wording that was issued to LEAs in the summer of 1965.

There are a number of authors who have identified parliamentary arithmetic as a significant contributing factor that undoubtedly played a considerable role in the decision-making process of national policy and the means by which to achieve it.¹³⁶ Sumner offers a concise summary,¹³⁷ whilst Dean provides a more in-depth account of the decision not to legislate¹³⁸ and Reisman comments on the electoral considerations given to educational measures.¹³⁹ Both the decision not to legislate to implement their manifesto commitment of reorganising secondary education on comprehensive lines and the composition of Circular 10/65 would have been influenced by the precarious position of the Labour government, elected with an overall majority of four, following the 1964 general election. Although several authors recount the decision whether to legislate, they do not evaluate the potential risks if Wilson had opted for legislation, for instance, although Labour had narrowly won the general election, their policy of comprehensivisation remained, to a degree, controversial. Opposition emanated from a diverse range of sources from the Conservative parliamentary party to local authorities, and from educational groups to parents who protested against comprehensivisation. This created a dangerous environment in which the first Labour Government for 13 years could have potentially been defeated on a landmark education reform. There is also the risk of the legislative process itself, as there are several opportunities for a Bill to be defeated by its opponents and would require Wilson's government to win every Commons vote on the issue. A further considerable challenge for Wilson was party management, in ensuring every Labour MP would vote consistently with the Government, as it would have required only two MPs to abstain or vote against to wipe out the slender government majority. A precedent for such a situation already existed by January 1965, as set out by Pimlott, an attempt to fulfil a manifesto commitment to renationalise the steel industry had been derailed due to a by-election defeat and the rebellion of two Labour MPs.¹⁴⁰

The literature devotes significant space to the tenure of Michael Stewart and Tony Crosland as Secretary of State for Education and Science during Wilson's second administration. However, the developments that occurred under their successor Patrick Gordon Walker (PGW) had a significant impact on the Labour Party's secondary education policy. In January 1968, the Cabinet took the decision to postpone the ROSLA to sixteen from 1970 to 1972. This was at the behest of Roy Jenkins, the then Chancellor, who insisted on expenditure cuts. Although several authors set out the unfolding of events, James brings together the full accounts of the episode as told by the Cabinet's diarists: Barbara Castle, Richard Crossman and Tony Benn, as well as an excerpt from PGW's diary.¹⁴¹ Simon argues that with this decision, comprehensive reform was immediately set back as this directly impacted the building of schools which could have progressed reorganisation.¹⁴² This line of thought is reiterated by Cowan, McCulloch and Woodin, who jointly present the delay as undermining both government policy and utilised by LEAs as a pretence to delay reorganisation.¹⁴³ In comparison, Dorey utilises the ROSLA decision as a case study of the interaction between public policy and administration, summarising it as a victory for short term economic needs over long-term social aims and middle-class cabinet ministers over their working-class colleagues.¹⁴⁴ It also demonstrates the impact of 'Departmentalism' in cabinet government, and the relative vulnerability of new policies compared to modifying or abolishing existing ones.¹⁴⁵

Although the literature assesses the impact of the deferment of the ROSLA, few authors have recognised the separate strands brought together in this policy decision; the significance of the individual level of analysis and the agency of elite actors, economic circumstances and the place of education in Labour's thinking. Firstly, the ROSLA has been an historically significant pursuit of the Labour Party and wider movement. It also had historical precedent with Attlee's cabinet considering a similar potential delay due to strained post-war finances. However, in that incidence, the crucial difference was that ROSLA had a staunch advocate in Minister of Education, Ellen Wilkinson, who ultimately convinced her colleagues to approve the measure. In contrast, PGW made no attempt to advocate on behalf of ROSLA, having taken a position the previous year and subsequently maintained this view on becoming Secretary of State, and according to Crosland's first-hand account had the deciding vote on the issue.¹⁴⁶ Wilson

outlines his role as weighing and summarising the Cabinet's view,¹⁴⁷ and Castle recorded Wilson's departure from his usual style by taking a note of views. Arguably, PGW held a more sceptical view of comprehensivisation, being viewed by other government ministers as more conservative¹⁴⁸ and, having previously had a close relationship with Gaitskell, voiced views on secondary education closer to the former Leader's.¹⁴⁹ Although authors correctly identify other contributing factors, the accounts of those around the cabinet table demonstrate the significance of the agency of the individual occupying the post of Education Secretary in this instance. Secondly, this demonstrates in two separate instances that the ROSLA, despite being a long-held ambition and a manifesto commitment in 1966,¹⁵⁰ was vulnerable to the economic concerns of the day. Perhaps this was especially acute in the aftermath of devaluation which made Wilson's need for Labour to be seen as economically literate an overriding concern. Third, while authors have identified the practical impacts of this decision in their analysis, there is no consideration of Labour's commitment to education, and the values of equality of opportunity and social mobility which underpin it. Under Wilson, the volatility and pressures of governance demonstrate that the Labour Party were prepared to compromise on the stated principles that were central to their democratic socialism and the aims of their policies.

In *New Labour, Old Labour*, Lowe proposes that the period overseen by Wilson from his first general election victory to his defeat in 1970 and the early years of the Heath government, saw the parties opposing positions on secondary education as merely a façade and that in actuality a consensus had developed between the parties in the politics of education and that this began to gradually break down under Heath.¹⁵¹ In support of this, Lowe points to the transformation of secondary education, with the central issue of comprehensivisation and selection as the major fault line.¹⁵² He notes that comments on education policy from senior figures, such as Jenkins, then Home Secretary, and Sir Edward Boyle, then Shadow Education Secretary, were very much in tune with one another, and that the driver of this harmonisation was gradualism and the Heath Government's readiness to accept compromise in comprehensive schooling experiments.¹⁵³ In evaluating this notion of a consensus on secondary education, there is evidence to support the idea that, while nationally there may have been some degree of convergence, there was at the time tension between the Conservative Party's grassroots, local authorities and their national policy. Fenwick outlines the developments in both government and opposition during this period, clarifying that the

1964 Conservative manifesto was ambiguous, and that commitments to raising the school leaving age and expanding education did not differentiate their policies from the other parties, thereby offering a degree of support to Lowe's theory.¹⁵⁴

However, Fenwick also offers evidence to rebuff Lowe's claims, going on to demonstrate the growing tension within the Conservative Party.¹⁵⁵ At several party conferences, the internal conflicts over the party's education policy were laid bare, as some members recognised the place of comprehensive schools and the need to move away from selection, while others rejected this.¹⁵⁶ Chitty shares Fenwick's assessment, claiming that there had been a successful campaign within the Conservative Party to reject Boyle's non-partisan approach and points to both the mobilization of right-wing backbenchers, local party activists and others within the Party.¹⁵⁷ Chitty goes as far to argue that the Conservative Party was "hopelessly divided on such important issues as comprehensive reform and the future of the grammar schools" at Conservative Party conference in 1968, citing the defeat of a motion in Boyle's name which called for moderation in secondary education policy.¹⁵⁸ Therefore, although there is some evidence to support Lowe's idea that there was a consensus between the parties, it was limited to the Government and Opposition frontbench.

While the prevailing sentiment within the literature is to term this period a consensus, a detailed exploration reveals a complex picture that indicates a more accurate label would be a settlement. Although Boyle accepted a more progressive approach towards secondary education policy and was convinced of the case for comprehensive schools,¹⁵⁹ there was a concerted campaign amongst the right-wing grassroots members and Parliamentary Conservative Party which pressured the leadership into a change of view.¹⁶⁰ For one, during Boyle's tenure, there was significant internal tension over Conservative policy on the reorganisation of secondary education, which led to specific stand-alone policies and ambiguity. This was reflected in both Boyle's amicable departure from the Shadow education portfolio in October 1969 and the selection of his replacement in Margaret Thatcher.

The three election manifestoes (1970,¹⁶¹ February¹⁶² and October 1974¹⁶³), which committed the party to deferring to the knowledge of LEAs and set them against compulsion of reorganisation, and the actions of Thatcher as Secretary of State for Education and Science

from 1970 onwards, demonstrate that, although the Conservative Party had yielded in the debate over secondary education reorganisation, the Heath administration had not capitulated entirely. Instead, the Government pursued specific policies to ameliorate comprehensivisation and, as argued by Woods, sought to maintain a mixed education system.¹⁶⁴ The settlement was influenced by, as multiple authors have noted, the fact that when the Heath government took office, 70% of LEAs, of both Labour and Conservative controlled councils,¹⁶⁵ had already made plans for reorganisation of secondary education. This overwhelming uptake by LEAs made comprehensivisation difficult to contest.¹⁶⁶ In response, Thatcher pursued policies to preserve selection in education, grammar schools, and attempted to stifle comprehensivisation by utilising any tool at her disposal as Secretary of State. For instance, Thatcher's first action as Education Secretary, the withdrawal of Circular 10/65 and publication of its replacement Circular 10/70¹⁶⁷, removed the compulsion of the Labour Party's policy and instead conferred the decision-making power on LEAs. Although this may appear a significant change in policy, as highlighted by Aitken this was not a change in legislation, nor did this prevent LEAs from pursuing comprehensivisation if they wished.¹⁶⁸

Similarly, Thatcher exercised a power contained within the 1944 Education Act, which her predecessors considered to be a reserve power, to examine comprehensive schemes submitted by local authorities.¹⁶⁹ Although Thatcher personally reviewed over 3600 plans,¹⁷⁰ she was only able to reject around 9% of these, and some of those grammar schools which gained a reprieve would shortly become comprehensives.¹⁷¹ As Secretary of State, Thatcher utilised her power over the Department for Education and Science's policy priorities and budget to the detriment of comprehensive reorganisation. One notable shift in priorities was in school building, as set out in the 1970 manifesto and implemented by Thatcher, this placed the emphasis on the construction of facilities for primary education and moved away from building secondary schools. This policy had the benefit of achieving two of Thatcher's aims simultaneously in fulfilling a manifesto commitment at the expense of comprehensives. As noted by Lawton,¹⁷² this shift specifically disadvantaged comprehensivisation as LEAs who had planned to reorganise secondary education provision would require a degree of new building.¹⁷³ While numerous authors are keen to emphasise Thatcher's role as the Education Secretary who would approve more comprehensive plans, and therefore the closure of more grammar schools, than any of her predecessors or successors,¹⁷⁴ these attempts to slow

comprehensivisation and preserve selection significantly undermine the notion that there was a consensus between the parties.

Therefore, the diversity of and tension between views present within the Conservative Party would support the notion of a settlement. During their period in Opposition, there was disquiet between backbenchers, party members and Boyle as Shadow education portfolio holder. In contrast, while in government, Thatcher found that the adoption of comprehensive planning by local authorities, specifically Conservative controlled LEAs, had made it effectively impossible to pursue any other form of secondary organisation as a meaningful national policy, thereby leaving her few policy options but to attempt to preserve selection in secondary education.

The literature that addresses the first two Wilson administrations from 1964 to 1970, narrowly covers the central issue of the expansion of comprehensivisation and its manifestation in Circular 10/65, with authors pointing to select evidence to support their view on this issue. As a landmark reform in the journey of comprehensivisation and the reorganisation of secondary schools, it is to the detriment of other issues related to secondary education. The material that attempts to analyse other elements offers only a disparate and disjointed picture of this time, with little discourse between authors. This is demonstrated by the plethora of areas covered by each author. Fenwick provides a detailed account of the issues surrounding local authorities attempting to plan for comprehensivisation and the positions of educational associations,¹⁷⁵ while Martin evaluates Wilson's educational priority areas and expansion of higher education.¹⁷⁶ An area shared by Chitty¹⁷⁷ and Martin¹⁷⁸ is the analysis of the role of the Comprehensive Schools Committee, established by Caroline Benn and Brian Simon as a left-wing campaigning organisation.

Labour's third stint in office during the 1970s can be divided into two short periods, aligned with the narrow re-election of Wilson as Prime Minister in 1974 until his resignation, and the succession of James Callaghan in 1976 up to his defeat in the general election in 1979. While these time periods are historically convenient, they also denote a step change in secondary education policy.

Lowe's argument can be summarised as thus: the years 1974 to 1976 represented a continuation of policy as Labour attempted to finish what the policies of the previous Labour administrations had begun and to restore those elements that had been disrupted by the Heath government.¹⁷⁹ This is an assessment reaffirmed by Simon, who highlights the continuation of comprehensive reorganisation as the main issue Wilson focused on, pointing to the February 1974 manifesto, Prentice issuing Circular 4/74 in April 1974 and the introduction of an education Bill to empower the Education Secretary in December 1975 in order to complete reorganisation.¹⁸⁰ Notably Lowe and Simon only briefly mention the Assessment of Performance Unit (APU). Established by Wilson in autumn 1974 following concerns around standards and accountability in schools, a division within DES tasked with surveying and monitoring levels of achievement in schools. In contrast, Chitty describes its place in the *Yellow Book* as one of three subjects of immediate concern and evaluates it as an attempt by central government to control the curriculum.¹⁸¹ This undermines, to a limited extent, the narrative of inertia and inaction levelled by Lowe and Simon against Wilson during his final term as Prime Minister.

Material covering the period between 1974 to 1979 demonstrates broad agreement amongst authors as to the factors which contributed to education becoming a major political and economic issue. Three considerable contributions are made by Chitty, Lowe and Simon, all of whom concur with one another through inclusion of many of the same influences. Chitty provides a convincing and substantiated account of the underlying causes of the Ruskin speech and subsequent Great Debate. In brief, these are the economic and financial crisis between 1973 and 1975, the critique of education by industry and the media, political concerns, and the Prime Minister's personality.¹⁸² Simon places considerable emphasis on the criticism education faced from the authors of *The Black Papers*, journalists, politicians and industrialists, and the Tyndale affair, which raised the question of accountability in schools.¹⁸³ Similarly, Lowe makes the argument that there was an undercurrent of issues that raised the political salience of the governance of education, which were building to a head and needed to be addressed.¹⁸⁴ Although Lowe identifies many of the same sources of exogenous and endogenous pressure as Chitty and Simon, he emphasises a sense of a loss of control of education, citing LEAs rush to reorganise upsetting the balance between central and local

government control of education, the role of the Schools Council, the public perception of transformation in several aspects of education, and local government reforms.¹⁸⁵

The analysis of the outcomes of the Ruskin speech are broadly shared by authors. Chitty offers a clear evaluation when he marks out the intervention as signalling the end of a period of expansion in education, a shift towards value for money, and a redefinition of educational aims.¹⁸⁶ Furthermore, he identifies a reorientation towards standards and employability as an attempt to neutralise the Conservative agenda and address the public's concerns, and that in order to implement policies on issues such as the curriculum, a shift of power towards the centre was necessary.¹⁸⁷ Finally, in his most incisive remark, he argues the speech was an attempt to forge a new consensus in education based on the requirements of the economy.¹⁸⁸ Lowe concurs with Chitty, outlining two discernible outcomes from Callaghan's premiership: first, the policy makers took a greater role in directing the education system, following a shift of opinion for greater efficiency, higher standards, and an emphasis on competence and employability.¹⁸⁹ Second, power in policymaking moved away from local authorities and teachers, and towards the Office of the Prime Minister and the No. 10 Policy Unit, while DES became enforcers of policy.¹⁹⁰

Within the literature, there is a discourse between authors concerning two specific historical claims. The first is regarding the extent of Callaghan's role as a catalyst for change, in contrast to the influence of exogenous factors, in the sphere of education policymaking. In evaluating the influence of Callaghan, Lowe argues that by surveying contemporary accounts in the print media, specifically *The Times* and the *Times Educational Supplement*, developments in education policymaking and the centralisation of power could have been anticipated.¹⁹¹ Lowe's analysis adopts a structural standpoint, claiming that the Ruskin speech should be seen as a reaction to the conditions of 1976 and that the subsequent policy initiatives were inevitable. Furthermore, Lowe mistakenly claims that Chitty and Simon both emphasise the importance of Callaghan's personal involvement as a major factor.¹⁹² While this may be accurate for the latter, Chitty makes clear in response to Batterson that he expressly places less emphasis on the personality of the Prime Minister, and cites many of the same contributing factors in his earlier work that fostered an environment that pressured the Callaghan government to revisit its priorities for education, thereby refuting Lowe's claim.¹⁹³ In contrast,

Hennessey refutes the structural analysis made by Lowe and Chitty, arguing that Callaghan was as agent of change himself rather than merely subject to it.¹⁹⁴ To support this, he points to Callaghan's 1976 speech to Labour Party Conference where he abandoned Keynesian economics, his Prime Ministerial broadcast on his first day in office, and the 'Themes and Initiatives' paper prepared by Bernard Donoughue, suggesting education as one area for possible intervention.¹⁹⁵ Although absent from Hennessey's analysis, Callaghan's conference speech also included a crucial passage on the relationship between education and industry, in a preview of the educational agenda that would be set out by the Ruskin speech.¹⁹⁶

An alternative perspective on Callaghan is offered by Riley. Although she recognises the role of the Tyndale affair and *The Black Papers*, she places emphasis on Callaghan's own hinterland and views. Riley argues that Callaghan's intervention was driven by his own experience of education and time in the trade union movement, resulting in a deep concern for the education of working-class children and access to education, and an innate conservatism.¹⁹⁷ This is supported by interviews with many of the major actors of the time, including Callaghan and Donoughue.¹⁹⁸ One element of Riley's argument that is understated in her own analysis is the view, as articulated in an interview with Donoughue, that the middle-class teaching profession was reinforcing disadvantage amongst working-class pupils.¹⁹⁹ Ruskin could therefore be interpreted as a move by a working-class Prime Minister, who having left education at fourteen and as a product of the trade union movement, attempted to anticipate public opinion and safeguard the welfare of working-class pupils, by intervening in and challenging the orthodoxy of an education sector that was dominated by a mostly middle-class profession, engaging in practices that were to the detriment of their working-class pupils.

The second, and more controversial, claim is related to the extent to which Callaghan's policies were a precursor to those of Thatcher's governments. Here is where there is a greater divergence of views between authors. Simon expresses the view that there can be no doubt that the Labour administrations between 1974 and 1979 represented a paradigm shift in education that 'paved the way ... for the Thatcherite domination of the 1980s'.²⁰⁰ This is reinforced by labelling media criticism as a 'propaganda crisis' which Callaghan sought to address by a 'deliberate move to the right'.²⁰¹ Chitty provides a significant contrast to Simon, explicitly refuting his argument by setting out how the actions of Callaghan created a new

consensus in education policy, which lasted until 1988.²⁰² Chitty substantiates this claim by noting that the absence of a reform agenda in education was a critique of Thatcher's first two governments articulated by her own supporters.²⁰³ To further build his argument, he quotes primary source material, citing interviews given by Sir Keith Joseph and Thatcher in 1987 in which they both acknowledge a lack of action in education.²⁰⁴ Chitty argues that until this point the Conservative governments were content to act within the framework established by the previous Labour administration.²⁰⁵ Batteson's own analysis urges caution about making such a narrow evaluation and repudiates the view expressed by Simon, arguing that utilising a cause and effect analysis is too simplistic.²⁰⁶ Instead, Batteson advocates that by 1976 effective criticism of education, which not exclusive to the New Right, had created momentum for potential reform of education.²⁰⁷ However, this was not exploited due to an atmosphere of inertia, resistance to change and preoccupation with existing issues amongst actors in the education sector including, LEAs, trade unions and government ministers.²⁰⁸ Batteson raises an important and often ignored point that criticism of the educational status quo was not the preserve of the New Right, with a group of Fabian members, who worked in education, anonymously authoring a pamphlet²⁰⁹ covering similar topics to those that Callaghan would later address.²¹⁰ A further rebuttal is offered by Hennessy, who outlines how the 'Themes and Initiatives' paper drafted by Donoughue specifically sought to combine education reform with Callaghan's values, whilst also warning that an overzealous approach could be perceived as 'Thatcherism', thereby highlighting the awareness of actors of this potential comparison.²¹¹ Lastly, a weakness in Simon's analysis is the influence of current events on his historiography, and the views and commitments of the author. The proximity of Simon's major publication in 1991 left him without the historical distance to discern the differences between Callaghan and the recently divested Thatcher, conflating the two distinct approaches to education. Similarly, such an approach reveals the Marxist commitments of the author in drawing parallels between a Labour Prime Minister and his Conservative successor. This is a common critique amongst those of the far left.

The importance of the Prime Minister's Ruskin speech is broadly agreed upon in contributions made by authors to the literature. However, in this period the day-to-day role of three Secretaries of State for Education and Science is demoted to the background. Reg Prentice's biographer, Geoff Horn, neatly précisés the position as fulfilling manifesto pledges but without

making significant contribution to education policy.²¹² In contrast, Lawton and Simon express a derogatory critique of all three Education Secretaries during this period, albeit Lawton's critique is brief and offers little substance,²¹³ while Simon's is stronger, providing an overview before focusing on specific developments during the respective tenures of Prentice, Mulley and Williams.²¹⁴ Although authors offer assessment of the three Ministers during this period, there are a number of potentially germane factors that are left unconsidered, for instance, the impact of Labour's single term in opposition, two general elections in 1974, Wilson's final two years and fatigue, parliamentary arithmetic, personal disaffection in Prentice's case, the pursuit of fulfilling long-term aims, and finally, Labour's attitude towards the Department of Education.

A notable influence of Callaghan's on subsequent governments is identified by Batteson, who offers an assessment of the office of Education Secretary, arguing that one consequence of education taking on greater importance was an improvement in the quality of the individuals who held that office, highlighting the political heavyweights and rising stars who occupied the role during Thatcher's administrations. To substantiate this claim he contrasts this with the Department's previous reputation of providing one of three roles: as a cabinet apprenticeship, the position for the only female cabinet member, or for those approaching the end of their political career.²¹⁵

Surveying the literature covering the 1974 to 1979 Labour administrations, authors have made significant contributions to important historical debates such as identifying the factors that influenced Callaghan's decision to intervene, the Ruskin Speech's immediate outcomes and impact on subsequent governments. However, despite authors detailing exogenous factors there is a failure to consider endogenous issues, such as the impact of fatigue on the Labour Party during this period, both in ideas and personnel, and to analyse Callaghan's significance specifically in relation to the development of the Labour Party's secondary education policy. Firstly, the party's overriding priority in education post-1951 had been the reorganisation of secondary education on comprehensive lines. With the passing of the 1976 Education Act, which placed comprehensivisation on a statutory footing for the first time, and with the vast majority of pupils attending comprehensives, the long-term objective of the party had been achieved. Similarly, previous Labour education ministers benefitted from well-defined long-

term objectives, such as the pre-war aim of secondary education for all and Gaitskell's post-war policy review which embedded comprehensivisation. Secondly, the generation of Labour MPs elected in the 1945 landslide, many of whom had become political heavyweights and talented ministers, had left frontline politics due to political rivalries, peerages or passing away, leaving Labour lacking the gifted administrators necessary to produce new policy and implement major reforms in government. The combination of Labour Party fatigue, coupled with changing economic circumstances, a hostile print media and public concern, resulted in a period where education policy was in flux. The Ruskin Speech should therefore be seen as an attempt by Callaghan, in office, to reinvigorate the impetus of secondary education policy, underpinned by traditional Labour values and contemporary concerns that continue to inform discourse on education. One indicator of the direction education policy was developing under Callaghan can be seen in the Green Paper *Education in Schools: A Consultative Document*²¹⁶ which further developed the proposal of a national curriculum.²¹⁷

2.4 Opposition: 1979 – 1994

Following Callaghan's defeat at the 1979 general election, the Labour Party was relegated to 18 years of opposition. In this period, the consecutive governments of Thatcher would make education a major theme and craft an agenda aligned with her transformational administrations. The emphasis placed on the role of choice and the market in education effectively ended Labour's decades long hold over education policy and challenged what had become the accepted norms of the country's comprehensive system.

A significant assessment of the Labour Party's policy on secondary education over a ten-year period from 1979 is offered by Inglis. In his article, Inglis argues that between these years, the Labour Party adopted a complacent approach to education and that the party failed to adequately challenge the Conservative government's ideas on the subject.²¹⁸ He further refines this by splitting the decade into four sections, entitled Labour's loss of the initiative: educational standards, failure to prepare for the Conservative challenge, Labour's failure to develop alternative policies and its lack of interest in educational policy.²¹⁹ This is complemented by two time frames, where he divides the period from 1979 to 1987, in which the Labour Party's policies were a continuation of the policy agenda from the 1960s and 1970s, and from 1987 to 1989, in which the Labour Party, he argues, was consumed with its

response to Conservative initiatives.²²⁰ In response to Inglis, Demaine offers a critique that dismantles many of the claims, setting out a detailed and evidenced account, demonstrating that Labour's response to the new agenda in education policy was much more complex than Inglis seeks to portray.²²¹

Inglis begins by outlining how Labour had lost the initiative between 1979 and 1987, making a brief claim that the Party had a complacent approach to policy as demonstrated by their lack of attention to the curriculum and a number of related policy statements such as full comprehensivisation,²²² while from 1987 to 1989, Inglis claims Labour's response became a mix of acceptance and defensiveness, and lists a number of areas of Government education policy which demonstrate this including the national curriculum, parental involvement and school management.²²³ Inglis points to Labour producing proposals on ensuring parental involvement with their child's education such as communications between the parent, school, pupil and local authority, and their intention to establish organisations to monitor standards and spread best practice.²²⁴

Demaine rebuffs the argument concerning the first three sub-headings within the article, highlighting that the evidence selected by Inglis hardly portrays a party which is complacent in educational policy.²²⁵ This argument is developed by Demaine, who goes on to note that numerous other policy announcements, from the completion of comprehensivisation to reducing inequality in education, are listed in Inglis' own article.²²⁶ Furthermore, Demaine makes a crucial point that Labour's acceptance of the need for reform to the secondary education system is a reasonable stance to adopt when faced with the position that the party was in at that time, and that this does not equate to an acceptance of Conservative policy.²²⁷ To support this claim, Demaine utilises Inglis' own example of the curriculum, noting that supporters of the idea of a national curriculum have been present within the Labour Party for a considerable time, quoting Jack Straw's response that the Tories were stealing Labour's policies when Conservative attention turned to a national curriculum.²²⁸ In evaluating this argument, there is a greater weight to Demaine's response and his counter thesis, as despite suffering the worst general election performance in the party's post-war history during this period, Labour were still pro-actively formulating policy in response to changing public opinion on secondary education along the lines set out by Callaghan in his 1976 Ruskin

speech, which also addressed the notion of a core or national curriculum. This line of thought is further supported by Chitty, who argues that for the first seven years of the Conservative governments from 1979, they were largely prepared to operate within the confines of the educational settlement that had been established by Callaghan's administration, such was the impact of the speech on establishing new thinking on educational policy.²²⁹

The second section of Inglis' article attests that Labour's loss of the initiative and absence of discourse can be understood in light of a lack of interest within the Party in educational ideas.²³⁰ To support his thesis, Inglis notes that the Fabian Society and the party's research department had not produced any material or initiated any debate on education, and that if Labour were sufficiently interested in education policy then this would render the think tank unnecessary.²³¹ This leads to the proposal that, in terms of education policy, such a situation is avoidable as many within Higher Education share sympathies with the Labour Party. In response, Demaine sets about dismantling Inglis' argument, in terms of both semantics and the formal mechanics of policy formulation. In terms of the former, he notes that Inglis' use of policy is flexible and undefined, as it is used to refer to both party policy and ideas about educational issues.²³² In the case of the latter, Demaine critiques Inglis for his failure to address how ideas emanating from these suggested sources might become party policy, and how they could be included for consideration in formal policy making structures.²³³

The second aspect of Labour's lack of interest in education policy, according to Inglis, is based on the publications by senior Labour figures, academic and practitioner, which have failed to offer a vision or any new ideas on education, and the lack of debate within the party on the subject. Here, he focuses on contributions made by Labour's Shadow Education Secretaries, Neil Kinnock and his chapter in Kaufman's *Renewal: Labour's Britain in the 1980's*,²³⁴ and Giles Radice's Fabian publication, *Equality and Quality: A Socialist Plan for Education*²³⁵ and *Labour's Path to Power: The New Revisionism*²³⁶ respectively. Inglis staunchly critiques Kinnock's contribution, accusing him of attacking the academic tradition of British schools and overlooks educational issues including the curriculum, educational standards and control of schools.²³⁷ In comparison, Inglis' critiques Radice's Fabian tract as anticipating Labour policy for the 1980s and its acceptance of Conservative policy. While his evaluation of Radice's works offers a limited degree of praise, *Labour's Path to Power* is ultimately critiqued as disappointing due

to the minimal attention and lack of detailed analysis of education policy.²³⁸ In reply to Inglis, Demaine constructs a convincing defence of Labour's record in this period, based largely on Kinnock's time as leader of the Labour Party. Beginning with the source used to facilitate the critique, Demaine notes that he subsequently published *Making Our Way*²³⁹ in 1986 which provided a detailed view on education policy.²⁴⁰ Specifically, Kinnock rejected the market whilst recognising the importance of choice in the debate on education, before advancing a solution of closer working relationships with sufficient resources, rather than the Conservative policy of offering real choice for the few, while limited resources led to a reduction in choice and educational opportunity for the rest. Furthermore, Demaine cites Kinnock's reaction to the 1987 general election defeat and subsequent publications on education policy policy such as *Parents in Partnership*²⁴¹ and Labour's policy review *Meet the Challenge, Make the Change*²⁴², which committed the party to the idea of partnership between parents, schools and LEAS, and the implementation of the Taylor Report.²⁴³ Demaine goes on to refute Inglis' other claim that Labour was complacent and did not rise to the challenge presented by the Conservatives, noting the efforts of Kinnock and A. H. Halsey, an advisor to several Labour education secretaries, as two examples of senior figures who were pro-active and did not lack initiative in education policy.²⁴⁴

As has been demonstrated by Demaine's response to Inglis, the latter's article offers only a shallow analysis of Labour's response to the Conservative agenda and offers a weak argument that is shown to be vulnerable when exposed to a well evidenced response. Inglis could have potentially made a stronger argument regarding deficiencies in the Labour Party's education policy in the decade from 1979 by selecting more salient topics that the party had struggled with in its recent past, such as the continued underachievement of working-class pupils at comprehensive schools, the role of grammar schools, and government's initiative of the assisted places scheme and differentiation within schools.

Outside of the dialogue between these two authors, there is a paucity of sources and academic contributions to the literature analysing the development of Labour's secondary education policy during the leadership of Michael Foot and Kinnock.

In assessing the lack of material on the development of Labour's secondary education policy during Foot's tenure as leader, there are several factors that one can attribute to this gap in the literature. Firstly, Foot's relatively short time as leader could have prevented any significant policy development in secondary education from taking place, with his victory in the leadership election of November 1980 and Thatcher's landslide taking place in June 1983. Secondly, Thatcher's relative unpopularity, low approval ratings and the Conservative Party's poor polling throughout the first three years of her term would have influenced the Labour Party thinking on secondary education policy, choosing to maintain the status quo in policy terms rather than revisiting and revising policies. Thirdly, in developing the party's programme, Foot had his own policy priorities, preferences and interests. However, the choice of issues was also influenced by the actions of the Government and events of the day. This led Foot to focus on the issues that were more germane during the early 1980s such as, the Government's handling of the economy, specifically the recession, unemployment and inflation, and housing. Lastly, the internal upheaval present in the Labour Party was a significant issue during Foot's leadership. This presented yet another time and effort-consuming obstacle to policy development, which ranged from changes to internal party democracy to Tony Benn's challenge against then Deputy Leader Denis Healey and the departure of the Gang of Four.

Turning to Foot's successor, there are important primary sources that can be drawn on in the absence of scholarship including conference speeches and autobiographies, such as Jack Straw's, which offers an insight into his time as Shadow Education Secretary and Kinnock's leadership style.²⁴⁵ For Kinnock, education became a recurrent theme of his Leader's speech at Labour Party conferences following his re-election as leader in 1988. Although precedent existed, only Wilson's 'white heat' speech in 1963 and Callaghan's 1976 in preparation for Ruskin had addressed the topic meaningfully, whereas other Leader's speeches had only mentioned the subject in passing. In contrast, there are notable sections or passages focusing on this theme in 1988,²⁴⁶ 1989,²⁴⁷ 1990,²⁴⁸ and 1991,²⁴⁹ in which 'education and training' became a common refrain. Kinnock's focus on the educational opportunities for sixteen to nineteen year olds can be viewed as being influenced by Callaghan's Ruskin speech and as a response to the conditions of the time, such as the Conservative governments' cuts to vocational training. Secondly, the development of party's secondary education policy should

be viewed in the wider scope of the Labour's Party's response to the distinct challenges of this period; successive electoral defeats, the New Left and New Right. This response was manifested in several publications, including Kinnock's speech entitled *The Future of Socialism*,²⁵⁰ Roy Hattersley's *Choose Freedom: The Future for Democratic Socialism*,²⁵¹ and Radice's *Labour's Path to Power: The New Revisionism*,²⁵² which sought to refute the New Right's interpretation of values such as liberty, and as an attempt to carve out a contemporary revisionism that could influence the party's direction respectively.

The final significant contributions to Labour's education policy in this period of opposition was during the tenure of John Smith as leader. Although his time at the helm of the Party was tragically cut short, Smith made a considerable contribution to maintaining the momentum of the modernisation and change programme that had been initiated by Kinnock. Across the literature, there are few papers that have reviewed the period concerning Smith's brief leadership. However, Lawton argues that the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) was an important source of ideas for the party during the 1990s and that its most significant period was between 1990 and 1994.²⁵³ Lawton claims that IPPR played a major role in revitalising and repackaging the Labour Party's ideas on educational issues, which reinterpreted socialist values and challenged the Conservative view of the market.²⁵⁴

This view has been reiterated by the Institute for Government (IfG), who demonstrate the importance and value placed by Smith on this relatively new resource through his decision to have it conduct the Commission on Social Justice, whose formal report was published shortly after his passing.²⁵⁵ The importance of new, left-leaning think tanks to the development of Labour's ideas on education is significant as it provided the space for the Party to consider ideas, test boundaries and develop new thinking without them being assumed to be party policy or risk falling foul of sectional interests. Furthermore, the IfG outlines that there was a gap in the political landscape waiting to be filled by such an organisation, quoting the then director of the Institute for Economic Affairs (IEA), as these groups worked at a quicker pace than academics, offered professional expertise in comparison to voluntary groups such as the Fabians, and could develop new ideas in a way party research departments and the civil service could not.²⁵⁶ Lawton and the IfG's assessment of this short period recognises the growing importance of this type of organisation in a changing political culture on the Left, with

the think-tanks embodying the changing approach that the party had adopted, and whose aims were later captured succinctly by John Prescott in a key speech where he coined the phrase “traditional values in a modern setting”.²⁵⁷ Perhaps more importantly was the facility IPPR provided as a home to the modernising elements of the Labour Party and related individuals, particularly Patricia Hewitt and David Miliband.

Lastly, despite Smith’s short period of leadership, he wasted no time in engaging the Party’s policy making machinery following the 1992 general election defeat and his election as leader, and thus there is enough material on education policy for it to merit closer inspection. Lawton outlines Ann Taylor’s time as Shadow Education Secretary, who was well respected within the sector, and published the Green Paper *Opening Doors to a Learning Society*.²⁵⁸ The consultation document set out ethical socialist principles in a modernising setting that also accounted for the economic benefits of education.²⁵⁹ In an opening note, Smith explicitly rejects the Conservative Government’s agenda of consumerism, centralisation of power and choice within education, in addition to the incessant changes in education policy itself. This is followed by the paper setting out that it offers a belief in equality, inclusion and the removal of unnecessary barriers, and subsequently relates a coherent set of values to a broad range of issues from a national curriculum, to the teaching profession, and assessment and examinations. In evaluating the period and the Green Paper, Lawton argues that through the Green Paper Labour came close to establishing an educational framework based on socialist values in a contemporary context.²⁶⁰ In assessing this argument, there is evidence to suggest that Lawton’s positive review of Smith’s development of education policy can be attributed to it being much closer to their personal view of the shape and extent of education policy. Although some may argue that consideration of education policy within these few years does not merit study, as ultimately this view and policy would never be implemented and were jettisoned shortly after Smith’s death, it does however provide a contrast with the subsequent leadership’s direction of travel and offers an insight as to how policy could have developed had Smith led Labour into the 1997 general election.

2.5 Conclusion

The major themes running through the literature analysing the Labour Party’s secondary education policy in the post-war period can be divided into three broad periods: tripartite,

comprehensivisation and post-1976. The first and second era reflects the Party's journey from supporting the tripartite education system, moving towards the comprehensive principle, before embracing it and its subsequent realisation in practice. The third offers a significant break from the previous decades, with the centralisation of power in educational policymaking and a contemporary agenda from the mid-1970s onwards. Each of these periods reflects a journey, from settled policy to upheaval and the adoption of a new position. Briefly, these are:

- 1941 – 1955: Leadership of the Labour Party were satisfied with the tripartite system for secondary schools. In contrast, there are simultaneously three other views present within the Party which supported: multilateral schools, the comprehensive principle, and the status quo.
- 1955 – 1976: A reassessment of education policy is undertaken, and Gaitskell subsequently commits the Labour Party to the reorganisation of secondary education along comprehensive lines, albeit with no clear plan for grammar or independent schools. Later, Wilson's government sets about attempting to implement it.
- 1976 – 1994: Callaghan breaks with convention: first, his intervention centralises the power in education policymaking, with greater involvement of the Office of the Prime Minister and the No. 10 Policy Unit. Second, he usurps the public narrative, reorienting focus towards standards in education, competency, and preparing pupils for the world of work. Kinnock and Smith continue this, and work to embed a contemporary secondary education policy.

Throughout the post-war period, the discourse portrays a party that is single-minded in the pursuit of its favoured policy when in government, with the only dissenting voices a small group of backbenchers agitating for an alternative policy during the Attlee and Wilson administrations. While in long periods of opposition, the Party undergoes a deep reassessment on its own policy programme, with significant changes in approach to secondary education policy evident during the leadership of both Gaitskell and Kinnock.

However, there are three long running and inter-related issues within secondary education policy that the Labour Party and successive leaders failed to address: grammar and independent schools, the total abolition of academic selection and a conflict of values. These are issues that many Labour Party heavyweights have struggled with, from Gaitskell, who decided that ultimately it was a question of values and that personal liberty was to be held in higher regard than even equality. This example signifies a broader tension within Labour's values that ultimately influenced its policy priorities and choices, as other notable works by Labour thinkers attempted to distil which principle should take greatest significance in the party's philosophy, so too did its leadership in developing policy. As portrayed in the above example, despite Crosland's recent work in *The Future of Socialism* which placed equality at the heart of Labour's impetus, Gaitskell was conflicted between the personal liberty of a parent's choice to pay for their child's education and the detrimental impact he believed such institutions had on wider society.²⁶¹ Similarly, while Education Secretary, Crosland accepted that he could not abolish independent schools as it would constrain personal liberty, instead he wished to undertake serious reform, to make a majority of the places at such schools free, or to do nothing. The latter option winning out in the end.²⁶² A separate but related issue to the grammar schools is the abolition of selection, which was an ongoing commitment made by the Labour Party and was still present as late as the 1992 general election with Kinnock's second manifesto committed to ending selection where it still existed.²⁶³ A similar reassessment of policy that was influenced by the party's values can be seen in Callaghan's intervention. With the social objective of reorganisation achieved to a great degree in ten years of government, and with Labour unwilling to reform independent schools, there was a necessity to reinterpret the party's values for a new generation. Therefore, with the structures of education exhausted, and a risk to equality of opportunity, a natural place to focus was what happened inside of schools.

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Chapter 3

Opposition and first term: 1994 – 2001

‘What a wise parent would desire for his own children, that a nation,
in so far as it is wise, must desire for all children’¹

R. H. Tawney

This chapter will provide a detailed analytical narrative of the Labour Party’s approach to the secondary education and attainment policies towards white working-class boys between 1994 and 2001. The subsequent two chapters will continue to trace this analytical narrative throughout the remainder of the Labour Party’s time in government. The first will examine Tony Blair’s premiership through his second and third administrations, from 2001 to 2007, with the following chapter assessing Brown’s premiership from 2007 until the Labour Party’s defeat at the 2010 General Election. This chapter will show that the Labour Party’s period of opposition under Blair’s leadership, between 1994 and 1997, was crucial to the shaping of the agenda in secondary education he would pursue once in government. This will be demonstrated through four key developments that explain the significant changes to the Labour Party’s education policy during this short period. The first focuses on Blair’s role as the key actor and his agency as the seminal change in the development of the party’s approach to education. The second is the ideational shift that draws on earlier changes made during the 1980s. The third are two policy documents published in this period. Lastly, it will consider the authors and publications who influence Labour’s political thought on education. The chapter will then set out how these developments informed the Labour Party’s first term in government, the policies pursued and their impact on white working-class boys.

3.1 Preparations for power: 1994 - 1997

The most significant factor in explaining the development of the Labour Party’s thinking on education and subsequent changes to secondary education policy during the period between 1994 and 1997 is Blair’s role as the key political actor who held key roles in the leadership of the party and the agency he exercised in affecting substantive changes to education policy.

The untimely death of John Smith on 12 May 1994 precipitated a change in the leadership of the Labour Party that would have the most significant impact on the party's approach towards education since Gaitskell's policy review and the adoption of comprehensivisation. The following leadership election saw Blair elected as his successor in July of the same year with an overwhelming mandate to substantially change the direction of the Labour Party. While there is sufficient literature recounting the direction of the Labour Party's education policy during Blair's leadership,² many authors of these accounts begin their thesis at the inception of Blair's time as leader and neglect the earliest signals, explicitly made during the leadership campaign, that he would take a decisively different path in this area to his immediate predecessor.³

As we have seen previously, Blair was not the first Labour leader to give education such a prominent position in domestic policy, with Neil Kinnock describing education and training as the 'commanding heights of every modern economy' in his Leader's speech to the 1989 party conference⁴ with this phrase subsequently being reiterated by his successor John Smith in a speech four years later.⁵ However, an important distinction should be made, as during Blair's campaign for the leadership he became the first prospective leader to place education as the pre-eminent domestic policy issue of his leadership. Education was situated within the broader themes of his manifesto for the leadership entitled *Change and National Renewal*. It announced 'Education is at the heart of our project for national renewal'.⁶ In the decades previous, the Labour Party's approach to education had, under successive leaders including Kinnock and Smith, come to recognise that reforms to education could make a meaningful contribution to improving the country's economic performance and efficiency, a common refrain amongst Labour leaders. In contrast to this, the narrative of Blair's leadership campaign sought to broaden the basis for the Labour Party's thinking on education, which became central to the country's economic and social renewal, which underpinned its approach in policy. The critical difference between Blair and his predecessors was that the overarching theme of education during his campaign for the leadership was deeply influenced by his personal biography. Specifically, his moral code and values as a practising Christian, which informed his views on subjects such as the family and community, would in turn be key to his understanding and analysis of social and economic policy, and in education becoming central to New Labour's political project.

Although Blair's personal biography demonstrated his individual motivation for his leadership campaign's focus on education, his role as the key political actor in incrementally changing the Labour Party's approach to education highlights the significance of agency in his decision-making. Throughout the leadership campaign Blair was not prepared to jettison the status quo and his stated ambition for education was much more subtle. As argued by John Rentoul, much of the included contents considering education in Blair's leadership manifesto was in fact already party policy.⁷ Many of the proposed policies and passages on significant issues in education were either repeated party policy, as was the case for commitments on nursery education, or reiterated broader ambitions that had been part of the Labour Party's education programme for decades, such as an end to the divide between academic and vocational education, which had been a key part of Kinnock's education policy. One of the clearest indications during the leadership campaign of Blair's impending departure from Labour's stasis in education was his disagreement with party policy on assessment and league tables.⁸ In suggesting this policy, Blair demonstrated a preparedness to depart from the Labour Party's established approach to education in two significant ways; first, a willingness to diverge from the consensus on education within the Labour Party and its settled policy prescription, which had been broadly consistent since the publication of *Learning to Live* in 1957; and second, a strategic shift to accepting many of the landmark education reforms implemented by the Conservative governments of Margaret Thatcher and John Major, such as the national curriculum, league tables and assessment. In the leadership election, Blair's campaign marked a strategic change in Labour's approach to education, which demonstrated his role as both the key political actor and the importance of his agency in decision-making. The proposed shift in policy was a subtle and calculated change that was a primarily double-sided electoral stratagem that was a delicate balancing act that attempted to maintain a broad appeal to both the Labour membership and the broader public simultaneously. At this point, this was critical to initiating the transformation of the Labour Party's image, as succinctly outlined by David Blunkett: "we were trying to stop being bogged down in reacting to the Conservatives' agenda and instead to absorb what we thought was sensible and then move on."⁹

Following his successful election as leader of the Labour Party on 21 July 1994, Blair would drive a shift in the ideational underpinning of the Labour Party's thinking on education between 1994 and 1997. Blair and his Shadow Education Secretary, David Blunkett, would pick

up the mantle; not from their immediate predecessors, John Smith and Ann Taylor respectively, but instead seizing on the revisionist intellectual tradition advocated by Giles Radice^a and James Callaghan's concern for the quality of education. From this ideational change, Blair would also make dramatic changes in Labour's strategic approach to policy and how these were changes were communicated to the electorate and wider public.

Upon his election as leader, Seldon considers Blair's view of education at this point to be the last unreconstructed Old Labour area of domestic policy, with his interest emanating from his experience as a parent of young children in primary education and his desire for a more inclusive society.¹⁰ However, while the Labour Party's education policy under Smith and Taylor might be characterised as such, there had been significant change to the ideational foundation of the Party's thinking on education during Neil Kinnock's first period of leadership. The catalyst of this process of ideational change was the then Shadow Education Secretary, Giles Radice. A committed Croslandite and social democrat, Radice sought to make equality of opportunity the underpinning value of Labour's thinking on education, combined with a contemporary policy agenda based on high standards and quality in schools.¹¹

Blair then, although not a Croslandite or a social democrat in the same vein as Radice, sought to supplant the more traditional Old Labour character of Smith and Taylor's approach with an ideology that shared similarities with Radice's, particularly a focus on equality of opportunity. One of the difficulties in demonstrating Blair's pursuit of an ideational shift is the comparative lack of material concerning his own personal ideology during his time as Leader of the Opposition. In a 1994 Fabian Society Pamphlet, Blair defines what he terms 'Ethical Socialism', as a set of values and beliefs that recognises individuals' duty to one another and society. He goes on to assert that through this interdependence, Ethical Socialism regards the self-interest of individuals as being directly linked to the interests of society, and that a strong and active society will advance individuals' interests.¹² This contrasts with his time as Prime Minister when his preference for equality of opportunity and fairness were made much more explicit.¹³ However, this ideational preference for equality of opportunity can be detected during this

^a Giles Radice was a Labour Member of Parliament for Chester-le-Street between 1973 and 1983, and for North Durham between 1983 and 2001. He served as Neil Kinnock's Shadow Education Secretary for four years between 1983 and 1987.

three-year period. Blair repeatedly used the term 'opportunity' in publications and speeches, and it is reasonable to infer equality of opportunity when Blair speaks of opportunity, especially in terms of educational attainment. Later, in 1996, Blair would deliver a lecture at Ruskin College, marking twenty years since James Callaghan's landmark Ruskin College speech, in which he would speak about opportunity.¹⁴ As education is one of the Labour Party's articles of faith, it is possible Blair was utilising a form of words that convey his preference for equality of opportunity and that would be less of a hostage to fortune. To this end, Blair initiated a shift in the ideational underpinning of the Labour Party's political thought on education, placing it on a basis that was adjacent to the ideas professed in Callaghan's Ruskin College speech and in the revisionist tradition of Radice.

Although this was not a quick process, the transformation of the Labour Party's approach to education was instigated shortly following the beginning of Blair's leadership. From the outset of his leadership, Blair's sought to exploit an early opportunity to exemplify the ideational change he would implement. The first week of Blair's leadership then saw the publication of a policy document, *Opening Doors to a Learning Society*, prepared during Smith's leadership by the incumbent Shadow Education Secretary Ann Taylor.¹⁵ The document opens with a message from Smith explicitly denouncing the approach of John Major's Conservative government, which he characterises as being "driven by consumerist dogma, by oppressive dictation by the central state, and by a false and inadequate theory of choice."¹⁶ The approach to education contained within *Opening Doors* is clearly encapsulated in two of the most politically salient issues in education of the time: assessment and school league tables. In terms of the former, Labour's stated position can be summarised in the language used to describe the two concepts, with summative testing described as "dangerous nonsense" and the school league tables as "indefensible rubbish".¹⁷ Later Professor Sally Tomlinson, an advisor to Taylor between 1992 and 1994, in an interview with Clyde Chitty described the document as "a genuine attempt to marry 'Old Labour' beliefs in comprehensive education with new ideas related to pedagogy and the role of teachers – an attempt to champion traditional Labour values in a modern setting."¹⁸ As recorded by Rentoul, Blair utilised the press conference to publicise the document to emphasise the distinction between his own vision for education and Labour's previous approach.¹⁹ To ensure the message was communicated effectively, Blair's team pre-briefed journalists of his intention to depart from

his then Shadow Education Secretary's position, instead endorsing the publication of school information for the benefit of parents. This is potentially the earliest episode which draws together the separate strands of change that Blair was pursuing in terms of ideology, policy, and image. Firstly, Blair challenged the status quo by departing from his predecessor's and Taylor's traditional Labour approach, that was based on a more rigid and outcome focused interpretation of equality, whose primary end was greater social equality. In contrast, Blair would demonstrate the ideational shift he was pursuing through contrasting his emphasis on equality of opportunity. Similarly, Blair's departure from the policies contained within *Opening Doors* were another signal to the media and electorate on potentially the most politically salient issues in education at that time, his effective endorsement of league tables and assessment. This is Blair following in a similar furrow to Radice, in attempting to shift the Labour Party's ideational foundation and political thought on education, to facilitate his overarching strategy of modernisation of the Party and neutralising potential domestic policy areas that were vulnerable to Conservative attack, Blair takes the first step in establishing a contemporary reform agenda in education to make standards and quality a Labour issue.

Initially, Blair did not seek to immediately move to discontinue the agenda in education policy devised by Smith's Shadow Education Secretary, Ann Taylor. Instead, for a short period, Blair opted to continue with Taylor in place. However, following the 1994 Shadow Cabinet Elections, Blair replaced Taylor with David Blunkett, who shared Blair's outlook of the education system. As Seldon notes, Blair was happy to delegate the task of transforming the Labour Party's education policy to Blunkett and fully supported him making the necessary changes.²⁰ This was achieved through a strategy of modernisation, that included the revision of policies that held symbolic significance to the Labour Party and were politically salient in order to craft a contemporary reform agenda in education.

The most immediate, and politically symbolic, change Blunkett made, just ten days after being appointed Shadow Education Secretary, was to reaffirm the Party's change in stance on league tables and that these would be retained under a Labour government.²¹ This approach to education would be embedded in the two major policy documents authored by Blunkett during Labour's time in Opposition: *Diversity and Excellence: A new partnership for schools* and *Excellence for Everyone: Labour's crusade to raise standards*. The first of these attempted

to settle the on-going discourse in the Labour Party about the organisation and structure of England's school system. Following the passage of the Education Reform Act in 1988, and the subsequent introduction of Grant-Maintained schools^b exacerbated the already acerbic discourse within the Labour Party over its approach to the organisation of schools, particularly the outstanding question over the remaining 164 grammar schools. The document proposed that the current organisation of maintained schools should in future be limited to three categories of school: community schools, aided schools, and foundation schools. The latter of the three would return those comprehensive schools which had opted for grant-maintained status to the control of local education authorities (LEAs) but provide them with a degree of autonomy that they held under their previous status. This was primarily an attempt to balance political interests within the Labour Party, as Blair and Blunkett sought to retain an element of the autonomy that was valued by grant-maintained schools and the democratic accountability that was the primary concern of party activists and members.

The second outstanding issue Blunkett sought to settle is another article of faith of the Labour Party, the position of grammar schools within the school system in England. The place of grammar schools in the Labour Party's approach to education has plagued the party since at least the leadership of Hugh Gaitskell, if not before, with the phrase 'a grammar school education for all'²² marking the first attempt by a party leader to neutralise the issue. Gaitskell's successor as leader, Harold Wilson, appropriated the same phrase. However, this piece of rhetoric acted as a sticking plaster for the remainder of the twentieth century as the leadership of the party did its best to ignore the continued existence of the schools. New Labour's first education policy document attempted to neutralise the issue by reiterating the party's long-term opposition to selection and the eleven-plus examination²³, and then set out a clear path to affect change to grammar schools by requiring local agreement and support of parents impacted by the decision.²⁴

Other historians, such as Chitty, have interpreted these events primarily through the lens of ideology, claiming that these moves by Blair were cynically embracing the Conservative Party's

^b Grant-Maintained schools, introduced on a statutory footing in the Education Reform Act 1988, was the reform agenda of the Thatcher government to introduce greater diversity into the school system of England and would facilitate the schools to manage themselves instead of the Local Education Authority.

agenda in education and abandoning Labour Party values.²⁵ This should be considered an eisegetical reading of events. Chitty ignores the significance and overwhelming political character of these decisions. From the outset of Blair's leadership, he sought to modernise the Labour Party and to transform it to such an extent that it was an acceptable party of government to the British electorate, and in doing so sought to settle outstanding issues across domestic policy that could jeopardise this objective. One such example of this was the long running dispute over grammar schools and selection. The critique of education policy by Chitty et al. is a familiar line of argument that is flawed and unconvincing as it is primarily rooted in the politics of the 1970s and 1980s New Left. Historians of education policy, many located in university education departments, cast themselves as idealists with the correct vision of education which has been thwarted since 1979 by Conservative and Labour administrations alike.²⁶

Blair's decision on the issue of grammar schools was fraught with risk as a historically divisive issue specifically for the Labour Party. While the New Left of the party viewed selection as one of the last bastions of privilege in the education system, Blair viewed it primarily through the frame of electoral politics, as continuing rifts in the party over the issue could potentially disrupt the theme of education that was the foundation of his leadership. However, there is an argument that white working-class boys did benefit from a grammar school education, with several male Prime Ministers in the mid-twentieth century having come from a less privileged background, including Harold Wilson, Edward Heath, James Callaghan, and John Major.²⁷ The comprehensivisation of the secondary education system in England has coincided with the re-establishment of Prime Ministers with a public school and Oxbridge education, including Tony Blair, David Cameron, Boris Johnson, and Rishi Sunak. However, there is a broad consensus in contemporary research amongst educationalists that disputes the value of grammar school education, with its critics arguing that selection is an unnecessary barrier and favours those from privileged backgrounds.²⁸

While the first policy paper produced by New Labour was intended to settle outstanding political disputes within the party over the organisation and structure of the secondary education system of England then the following paper, *Excellence for Everyone*, was intended to firmly establish a contemporary agenda in education that would make quality and raising

standards a Labour issue once more.²⁹ The breadth and depth of the policies covered by the paper points to a modernisation strategy that would leave no aspect of the education system untouched, with proposed policies on issues including the training, quality of and appraisal of both Headteachers and teachers, pay and conditions, class sizes and technology, school relationships with parents and the wider community. However, the most significant proposals were focused on: raising the standards and achievement in primary schools, with an early incarnation of what would become the literacy hour; to set targets for LEAs and schools; and to improve outcomes amongst groups of pupils who were underachieving, with the intention of reducing the gap in educational attainment between pupils in deprived areas and their wealthier peers. Under Blunkett's leadership, policies would be introduced to challenge and change the culture within both LEAs and schools, to reset the attitudes and expectations of pupils, parents, and teachers. Similarly, this policy strategy of school improvement would be pursued across all levels of the government and the education sector, from central to local government and to individual schools. If *Diversity and Excellence* was primarily intended as a tool of internal party management to settle divisive issues within the Labour Party,³⁰ then *Excellence for Everyone* was tasked with reaffirming the quality and standards narrative and further changing the perspective of the electorate. The intended audience and focus was to demonstrate to the electorate that Labour's modernising strategy would be pursued in an area of domestic policy that, to some in the party, had become an article of faith which was beyond revision. This narrative was furthered by the retention of legislation and policies first introduced by the Conservative governments, such as the Education Act 1988 and specialist school's initiative acted as another signifier to reassure the electorate that Labour had accepted the basic tenets of the contemporary education landscape. Ultimately, many of the policies contained within the two documents would form the backbone of the educational agenda implemented by the first Labour government.

However, a more critical approach to Labour's proposed policies notes the lack of detail on the issues of the educational attainment gap between girls and boys and the underachievement of white boys in deprived areas. This is despite the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) consistently expressing concerns about the former, and the latter to a lesser extent, in their annual reports in the years immediately prior to and during Blair's leadership in Opposition. Since the inception of Ofsted in 1992, the issue of boys'

underachievement had been raised in their first annual report covering the academic years 1992/93,³¹ and subsequent years 1993/94,³² 1994/95,³³ 1995/96,³⁴ and 1996/97.³⁵ Between the two policy papers, there is only a cursory mention of the issue of the attainment gap between the sexes in *Excellence for Everyone*³⁶ and the persistent underachievement in secondary education by white boys in deprived areas is absent altogether. Despite Ofsted, the Government's body tasked with, amongst other things, highlighting issues of concern in education, during the development of Labour's contemporary agenda in education, one of the most stubborn issues in education, which academics believe can be traced back to at least the 1980s, if not earlier, was not a priority for the party.³⁷

A further indication of the transformation of the Labour Party's approach to education under Blair and Blunkett's tenure in Opposition was the party's changing understanding of which group should have their interests prioritised in education. According to Seldon, Blair subscribed to the analysis that the party's thinking on education was primarily producer driven, predicated on the interests of the trade unions, and specifically the National Union of Teachers, rather than being centred around the interests of pupils and parents.³⁸ This had been a long-standing issue, identified by Radice over a decade earlier when he attempted to incrementally shift the emphasis of Labour education policy away from the trade unions and teachers and towards pupils and parents.³⁹ By late 1995, Blunkett was developing a range of policies that would have a dual intent. First, to shift the emphasis of Labour's policy decisively in the direction of pupils and parents, and second, to change the party's relationship with the established teaching unions in the education sector, and specifically the National Union of Teachers.

The most notable of these was the acceptance of school league tables, but an equally important proposal for those pupils in poorly performing secondary schools was Blunkett's Fresh Start policy. Fresh Start would see failing schools closed and a new school re-opened at the beginning of the academic year on the same site with a new headteacher, staff, governing body, and name.⁴⁰ The suggestion of closing schools and sacking staff prompted a strong response from the education and teaching unions.⁴¹ This change in approach further demonstrates the ideational shift that had taken place under Blair and Blunkett, which in turn drove changes in the Labour Party's understanding of education as a modern public service.

The shift in emphasis in policy and the unwelcoming response from the trade unions further demonstrated, to the electorate and wider public, both the small 'c' conservatism of the education trade unions and the party's strategy of modernisation. This cast the trade unions as the defenders of the status quo and drew a clear contrast with the party as challenging the vested interests in both the trade union movement and the education sector in a bid to improve the lot of pupils and parents. Although this approach is critiqued by some as embracing the Conservative Party's agenda, this argument reveals the views of the author.⁴² In an attempt to recapture the standards agenda, Blair and Blunkett were advancing similar arguments to those expressed by both Callaghan and Radice, expressing the same concern for the quality and standards experienced by disadvantaged pupils and acknowledging that low standards were an impediment to greater equality. This located arguments of the new Labour leadership firmly in Labour's intellectual tradition and recent past.

One of the most important contributing factors that would influence the Labour Party's contemporary education agenda during this period was the fervent activity in the intellectual discourse around education and the resulting publications. This was an intense period of interest in education with research and publications emanating from think tanks, academics, journalists, and other outside organisations that would directly challenge the long-held beliefs and policies of Labour and of those on the left more broadly. Firstly, the establishment of the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) in 1990 would lead to a tranche of policy papers and other publications. These included papers from David Miliband, such as *A British 'Baccalaureat'*,⁴³ *Learning By Right*,⁴⁴ and *Markets, Politics and Education*⁴⁵ as part of the Education & Training series. As well as contributions by respected academics in higher education, such as Tim Brighouse and Michael Barber's publication *Partners in Change*.⁴⁶ Secondly, by academics who shared Blair and Blunkett's sensibilities, such as then Professor Michael Barber. Barber published a number of influential documents. However, the most significant were his 1995 Greenwich Lecture entitled *The Dark Side of the Moon: Imagining an End to Failure in Urban Education*,⁴⁷ and two further publications in 1996, an inaugural professorial lecture at the Institute of Education, *How to do the Impossible*,⁴⁸ and his book *The Learning Game*.⁴⁹ Lastly, there were those commentators in the media who held an interest in the New Labour project and its agenda in education, and whose writings would in turn influence the party's approach. The two most notable were *The Guardian's* economics editor,

Will Hutton, and the *Observer* and *Financial Times* columnist, Andrew Adonis. The former's book *The State We're In*⁵⁰ was highly regarded by Blair and the latter's writing was noted for his call for Blair to be his own Secretary of State for Education.⁵¹ These publications hold particular significance as the authors would exercise influence over the Labour Party's education agenda and would go on to hold influential roles in both the Party and then in Government. These publications were strengthened by networking between authors, as demonstrated by Barber noting the strength of Miliband's comments on an early draft of an IPPR publication co-authored with Tim Brighouse.⁵² Although some of the research would be published prior to Blair becoming leader of the Labour Party, his election as leader was nonetheless a critical factor in much of this research coming to prominence and influencing the policies of New Labour, as these policies did not receive the same attention under Smith's leadership.

Blair utilised his relatively short period as leader of the Opposition to achieve two distinct objectives in education. The first was to apply his modernisation agenda to the Labour Party's political thought on education and its policies being similarly transformed and re-cast in the shape of the themes of change, national renewal, and social inclusion. The second was to settle outstanding issues in education that had plagued the Labour Party, the most notable being the controversy around grammar schools and selection, and the relative autonomy and independence of grant-maintained schools. Coupled with the fact that Blair and Blunkett were content to retain them, albeit redesignating them as Foundation Schools. Overall, the years between Blair's election as leader in 1994 and Labour's election to office in 1997 should be seen as critical for two key reasons: firstly, the policy development undertaken in Opposition formed the subsequent agenda pursued in education, offering a clear sense of direction in the first term; and second, the meticulous preparations and planning by Blunkett and other key political actors, transformed what could have been a domestic policy quagmire into one of the Labour Party's great strengths.

3.2 First term: 1997 - 2001

Following Labour's landslide victory in the 1997 general election, the first Blair administration began to implement their agenda in education policy. The popular perception of this period maintains that Blair's governments pursued primary education in the first term and secondary

education in the second term after the 2001 general election. A more accurate characterisation would be that during Blair's first administration primary education was of primary importance. However, a meaningful secondary education and attainment policy was pursued throughout. Firstly, the major White Paper of the Labour's government's education agenda, *Excellence in Schools*, was published 67 days after taking office and would set out plans for the whole five-year parliamentary term.⁵³ This included headline secondary education initiatives such as the Fresh Start programme and Education Action Zones, outlined in the third and fourth sections of the White Paper respectively. Second, these initiatives were shortly followed by the launch of Excellence in Cities in 1999. Lastly, the priority conferred upon primary education cannot be ignored, with the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies (NLNS) acting as Labour's rising tide of state education.

The third section of the White Paper, entitled *Standards and Accountability*, sets out a range of measures that the Government sought to implement as part of their agenda to drive up quality and standards in schools, whilst holding schools responsible for their own performance. This included one of the two most significant policies to drive Blair's attempts to tackle underachievement in the school sector, Fresh Start. This was further complemented by other measures that contributed to improving the secondary education and attainment of white working-class boys at school level, and both local and central government. This included improving the data tracking of pupils; LEAs devising Education Development Plans (EDP); and central government inaugurating a new regime of targets and support respectively.

As set out in the White Paper, a Fresh Start was a last resort for schools that could not adequately improve performance and complemented other options including transferring students to successful local schools or having a LEA authorise the school to be taken over by a successful neighbouring school. Alternatively, Fresh Start would see the closure of the school altogether and a new institution open on the same site with a new name and management.⁵⁴ The intent of this policy was to arrest the decline of an institution with substantive changes acting as a catalyst to place the school on an upward trajectory. Although there was no official evaluation of the Fresh Start policy commissioned by the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), other bodies such as the National Audit Office (NAO) and academic researchers have offered their own assessments. The NAO's report, *Improving Poorly*

Performing Schools in England, when assessing the success of the Fresh Start initiative noted that there was “good evidence from the Fresh Start programme”⁵⁵ of schools achieving improved performance and that GCSE attainment had improved compared to the predecessor schools.⁵⁶ Although not free of criticism, authors who are critical of the Fresh Start programme cite weak evidence for their assessment, often focusing on selective cases where the results have been unsatisfactory in an attempt to demonstrate the wider failure of the initiative, such as Tomlinson,⁵⁷ or root their argument in the failure of the programme to take stock of broader social ills in their attempt to improve attainment as argued by Araújo.⁵⁸ However, this line of argument fails to acknowledge the narrow policy intention of the Fresh Start school improvement programme, which was only implemented when all other options to recover a school’s performance had been exhausted. Furthermore, Fresh Start attempted to raise the quality and standards of factors that were directly within a school’s remit, while the broader theme of government policy at the time sought to ameliorate broader social factors that impacted the attainment of pupils at schools in disadvantaged areas. Whilst the Fresh Start programme had a substantive impact on the attainment of pupils, David Blunkett noted that it also had an impact on the culture in schools and on attitudes towards failure, claiming that:

It was a bit of an electric shock into the system that we simply weren’t going to put up with it and either you did something about it yourself ... or there would be major intervention.⁵⁹

The Fresh Start programme made an indirect impact on the secondary education and attainment of white working-class boys and girls by intervening in poorly performing schools that were primarily located in economically and socially disadvantaged areas and creating conditions that were conducive to an upward trajectory of improving educational outcomes for all pupils.

The remainder of the third section of the White Paper included significant but underappreciated measures that continue to influence the contemporary landscape of secondary education and attainment policy. Firstly, at the local government and school level, an increase in the strategic use of pupil performance data and EDPs. The use of data was an important element in the Labour government’s strategy for recognising and improving

educational achievement for under attaining groups. This was found in proposed improvements to the use pupil performance data, with each school holding a system to identify the progress of each pupil as they moved through their school career.⁶⁰ There is a paucity of sources regarding this underlying reform, with the only data available coming directly from an interview with the author. Therefore, while this was an important contribution that facilitated the identification of patterns in attainment by pupil characteristics and informs analysis of the educational underachievement by white working-class boys, it has been corroborated only by its inclusion in the White Paper and by actors in the Government at the time. In an interview with the author, then Head of Standards and Effectiveness Unit at the DfEE, Michael Barber set out the source of pupil identifiers:

One of the first things I started on in 1997/8, was getting the DfE to collect individual pupil level data, the identifiers. That didn't happen when I started. Now, it's everywhere and it informs everything, and researchers and it informs the department. We, I with David Blunkett's consistent support, pursued that even though not everybody wanted to do it. Some people thought it was too difficult, so we should get credit for that underlying reform because that enables you to track these gender differences and until you get individual student level data you can't really do that.⁶¹

This was complemented by the introduction of EDPs to be drawn up by LEAs, with guidance from the DfEE's Standards and Effectiveness Unit and approved by the Secretary of State. Although this was a broader measure for local authorities to produce a school improvement strategy with relevant key performance indicators, there was an explicit expectation that, having been provided with LEAs comparative performance data, this would enable schools to analyse the data for attainment gaps between genders and ethnicities.⁶²

In the fourth section of the White Paper, *Modernising the comprehensive principle*, the Government set out the second of its two most significant education policies, Education Action Zones (EAZ). As per the White Paper, EAZs were a deliberate attempt to mitigate social exclusion and improve economic prospects by raising standards and attainment in schools, establishing the new zones in areas with "underperforming schools and the highest levels of

disadvantage.”⁶³ The EAZs were in operation from September 1998, beginning with 25 areas and rising to 73 at the height of the programme, each contained two to three secondary schools and their feeder primary schools. The action zones were an innovative and early attempt at public service reform in the mould of New Labour’s ‘Third Way’ approach that would become more apparent in subsequent years. This approach was characterised by encouraging the development of partnerships between local government, the private sector, parents, and community organisations. The first tranche of 25 zones were each allocated an additional £750,000 annually in funding from central government for three years, and there was an expectation that each zone would raise further funding from local businesses and voluntary organisations.

In the EAZs policy, Blair’s values and beliefs were reflected as a method to tackle social exclusion through improving equality of opportunity for all pupils living in deprived areas through the transformation of their secondary school and improving their attainment. However, there is a consensus across academic and official literature that EAZs did not live up to their objectives. In a major academic study, Power et. al. found that the impact of the policy within the zones was limited in its extent and improvements in pupils’ attainment was inconsistent.⁶⁴ Furthermore, the secondary schools within the zones had not ‘added value’ to attainment at Key Stage 3^c (KS3).⁶⁵ Similarly, a report by Ofsted in 2003 assessing the impact of EAZs on educational attainment and social exclusion in disadvantaged areas found that results at schools in EAZs were fluctuating. Ofsted concurred with Power et. al. findings, noting that in national KS3 assessments in both English and mathematics, results remained below average and that the outcomes achieved by 16-year-olds were an “area of serious weakness.”⁶⁶ Ofsted noted that the results between pupils in areas of disadvantage and their wealthier peers were not being reduced at KS3 and at worst were increasing. The most significant reason, Ofsted claimed, that could be attributed to this situation in assessment was due to EAZs failing to place high priority on improving standards at KS3. At GCSE, EAZs had made slight improvements with around 25% of pupils achieving five A to C grades, this was only half of the national average.⁶⁷ This consensus between academic and official assessments

^c Key Stage 3 includes pupils aged between 11 and 14.

of Education Action Zones was shared by several key political actors of the first Blair administration, Sir Michael Barber offered a frank assessment of EAZs:

The way I think about those is that Education Action Zones was my responsibility, and they weren't very good, and I was responsible for that, I feel that that wasn't good, that wasn't well done, policy wasn't well designed, it wasn't well implemented.⁶⁸

While David Blunkett's Special Adviser Conor Ryan offered a more succinct view: "We tried the Education Action Zone model initially, it didn't work as well as we would've hoped",⁶⁹ as did the then Head of the Number 10 Policy Unit, David Miliband: "I don't think the Education Action Zones ... really worked."⁷⁰ Despite its status as a flagship education policy of the first Blair administration, that prototyped the model for future public service reform and manifested the values of equality of opportunity and social inclusion that Blair prioritised, EZAs were broadly a failure with a few minor successes. This represents a clear failure of Blair's first term administration to improve the secondary education and attainment of white working-class boys and girls in some of the most disadvantaged areas of England. One of the possible difficulties experienced by the action zone policy was not adequately accounting for the complex structural challenges that impact effective secondary education and attainment. Blair's first administration failed to reconcile these long-term social and economic trends with the short-term nature of policy and performance measures. Furthermore, the involvement of LEAs in the EAZs policy is antithetical to the direction of New Labour's education agenda, which viewed LEAs with scepticism for their role in overseeing underperforming secondary schools for decades. Perhaps the most significant outcome of the action zones policy was the inception of a form of policy development that followed an iterative process, which would see the launch of Excellence in Cities just 12 months later.

In March 1999, the second flagship education policy of Blair's first administration was launched to improve educational attainment and to tackle social exclusion in urban areas. This programme, known as Excellence in Cities (EiC), was a strategy with the specific objective of improving pupil attainment in disadvantaged inner-city conurbations. The strategy was launched in 25 LEA areas, covering 400 secondary schools and six large metropolitan areas:

Inner London; Birmingham; Manchester and Salford; Liverpool and Knowsley; Leeds and Bradford; and Sheffield and Rotherham. By 2003, this had grown to around 1000 secondary schools, accounting for around a third of all secondary schools at the time. In short, EiC involved distributing additional funding and resources to Partnerships, with each Partnership consisting of an LEA and the secondary schools under its remit. The Partnership would then decide how to best allocate the funding. This was an approach that both David Blunkett, then Secretary of State for Education and Employment, and Conor Ryan, Blunkett's then Special Adviser, believed had contributed to its success, with the former stating:

I think the best of those initiatives was Excellence in Cities because it was based on pedagogic evidence, and people actually being able to reinforce good practice and spread good practice fairly quickly.⁷¹

With Ryan echoing this sentiment concisely: "I think Excellence in Cities worked better because it had more of a partnership approach."⁷² Here, the influence of Anthony Giddens' Third Way can be seen, with the partnership approach between the public and private sectors being applied to the delivery of education.

There were at least six identifiable strands to the EiC policy, intended to extend educational opportunity and ameliorate obstacles to learning, with the three most significant being: Learning Mentors, to support pupils learning and behaviour; Learning Support Units, offering alternative provision away from the classroom for difficult pupils; and the Gifted and Talented programme, to raise standards amongst 5 to 10% of pupils who require a higher level of challenge. Other measures included in the EiC policy were the extension of the Specialist school status, a process by which schools could specialise in a particular subject and would bring further funding; Beacon school status, again receiving extra funding in return for disseminating effective practice to improve pupil attainment with other nearby schools; City Learning Centres, which facilitated access to ICT equipment; and further Education Action Zones.

This diversity of provision was perceived as a strength of the EiC agenda, as it was intended to raise all pupils' attainment with varying degrees of support recognising the different levels of

aptitude amongst pupils and the obstacles to making progress. This ranged from those who needed moderate support to address behavioural and attitudinal issues towards learning with a Learning Mentor to those struggling with conventional secondary education, who required alternative provision such as at Learning Support Units, and recognition through the Gifted and Talent strand that the most able pupils should be challenged to aim higher. Learning Mentors were specifically singled out as particularly valuable by both Blunkett, who highlighted their importance as a connection between home and school, "Learning Mentors ... were designed to be the link between home and school to be able to nurture children that just needed that extra outside school hours",⁷³ and Ryan for its impact on attitudes towards learning, "I think one of the things that it [EiC] did that was quite important was addressing behavioural issues. So, it introduced the concept of learning mentors."⁷⁴ The intention of Learning Mentors then was to ameliorate the barriers to pupils learning by substantively changing the attitudes and behaviours of pupils towards education to both raise attainment but to also contribute towards a more positive relationship between the school and parents, and to encourage greater involvement by parents in their children's education, part of a broader attempt to influence the culture of the home and assuage attitudes towards education. Similarly, significant was the development of the Gifted and Talented strand, as a unique component that would have not been devised by Labour under a different leader. Blair's emphasis on equality of opportunity over that of social equality, represented in education under the banner of comprehensive schooling did not have to mean equality in mediocrity, with the Gifted and Talented strand of EiC presenting a challenge to ensure the most able pupils also made progress throughout their school careers and further improved their attainment, achieving their potential.

Findings from a diverse range of studies across both official and academic literature which have conducted evaluations of the EiC policy have reached a broad consensus that the programme had a demonstrable positive impact on both the standard of secondary education and pupils' attainment. A comprehensive national evaluation of the EiC policy, utilising qualitative and quantitative data, was conducted by Kendall et al. which showed a particularly strong association between EiC and increases in pupil attainment in Maths at KS3.⁷⁵ More broadly, although EiC pupils achieved lower outcomes than their peers in non-EiC areas, EiC pupil performance at KS3 increased on average at a rate that was either equal to or greater

than their non-EiC peers.⁷⁶ Assessing Key Stage 4 (KS4)^d pupil attainment, Kendall et al. concluded that there was a weaker relationship between EiC participation and pupil attainment at GCSE. However, the author notes an important limitation of the study is that potential participation by pupils in EiC at KS3 could have diminished the impact of the programme at KS4.⁷⁷ Although there is a limited association between the EiC programme and attainment at GCSE overall, it suggests that the implementation of the programme at a LEA and school level could be a significant explanatory factor in the greater heterogeneity of improved pupil outcomes. Similarly, in a quantitative comparative study of KS3 pupil performance data in schools prior to and after enrolling in the EiC programme and compared to non-EiC schools, Manchin et al. found a pattern of improved pupil attainment in both Maths and English in English secondary schools participating in EiC.⁷⁸ These findings were also shared by Ofsted, who noted that results at KS3 in both Maths and English, had risen significantly faster than results nationally between 1998 and 2000, with each subject surpassing the national rate by 1.8% and 1.5% respectively. Although this was not without its limitations, as Ofsted noted that these results were still below the national average. Reviewing GCSE performance measures, Ofsted recognised that KS4 results at EiC schools were below the national average but that the rate of improvement in one GCSE pass at grades A* to G was above the national average and five GCSE passes at grades A* to C was almost equal to the national trend between 1998 and 2002.⁷⁹

The evaluation by Kendall et al. of the EiC programme also considered its effectiveness in improving the attainment of pupils' characteristics salient to this study including: entitlement to free school meals (FSMs); boys; and, pupils who identified their ethnicity as White UK. Firstly, the assessment concluded that at KS3 a more pronounced relationship between disadvantaged schools with a high number of pupils in receipt of FSMs and a stronger impact of the EiC policy.⁸⁰ At KS4, the majority of EiC schools saw a reduction in performance disparities compared with non-EiC schools, although there was greater variation between EiC schools.⁸¹ Second, in terms of gender, Kendall et al. found EiC to have a negligible impact at KS3⁸² and that at KS4 there was no evidence of a link between EiC and gender.⁸³ In a separate more detailed study, Kendall explicitly states that, when accounting for school and pupil

^d Key Stage 4 includes pupils aged between 14 and 16.

characteristics and comparing like-for-like pupils, there were no differences in the performance of White UK boys at EiC and non-EiC schools.⁸⁴ In contrast, Machin et al. take a different view, arguing that pupils exposed to EiC achieved modest gains in attainment, with the data demonstrating a slightly greater effect for boys than that of girls in Maths.⁸⁵ Lastly, Kendall et al. found that at KS3 and 4 pupils from White UK backgrounds attending EiC schools achieved similar outcomes as their peers attending non-EiC schools. Although this is considerable achievement by the EiC programme, Kendall et al. noted that attainment for other ethnic groups was below that of White UK pupils from the outset of KS3 and at the end of KS4. However, when factoring in school and pupil characteristics, the attainment for all ethnic groups at the end of KS4 was higher than that of similar White UK pupils.⁸⁶

If the policy objective of the Excellence in Cities programme was to promote social inclusion and equality of opportunity by improving standards and attainment amongst pupils in disadvantaged urban areas, then it has been a partial success. There is a settled view, across separate academic studies and official assessments, that there was a positive, if uneven, relationship between EiC and improved educational outcomes for pupils in participating schools. This was evidenced by the robust data from a broader long-term national study and a narrow short-term evaluation, both of which specifically indicated a strong relationship between EiC and advances in pupil attainment in Maths. However, although progress was made in secondary education attainment more broadly, when accounting for school and pupil characteristics, Kendall et al. showed a more complex picture. While pupils in receipt of FSMs made good progress in EiC schools compared to their peers in non-EiC schools, there was a negligible relationship between EiC participation and gender. This was also the case when considering ethnicity, as White UK boys did not significantly benefit from participation in EiC schools. Nor did White UK pupils make as much progress as their peers of other ethnicities when comparing like-for-like pupils. This would suggest that other contributing factors that had been a lower priority for Blair's first administration, beyond the school gates, could have been a significant oversight.

At the point that Blair took office as Prime Minister in 1997, beyond an overarching objective of extending equality of opportunity through improving the quality and outcomes in education for the disadvantage, Blair did not have a radical education policy for the secondary

sector. This would manifest itself in the form of a piecemeal agenda in education and iterative approach to policy development. During the first Blair administration, flagship programmes such as EiC, EAZs and Fresh Start were part of a broad strategy of improving the quality and standards in the secondary education system, all with the same aim of driving attainment. This agenda was composed of specific, targeted, and limited policies that utilised the institutions of the state as the primary tool to mitigate social and economic disadvantage, and which ultimately struggled to ameliorate the entrenched structural challenges faced by pupils, both within and without the school grounds. While Blair and Labour focused rightly on the most deprived areas, this meant relatively narrow support for disadvantaged pupils in more affluent areas of the country. Seldon notes that part of the success of education in this first term of Labour government, and particularly primary education, was because of the detailed plan set out in Opposition.⁸⁷ Although Blair and other actors had planned in depth during Opposition, there was no definitive idea that would guide his approach towards the secondary education and attainment of white working-class boys. Furthermore, the absence of a broader idea to improve secondary education, akin to the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies (NLNS) in primary education, should be considered a critical factor in the development of an iterative approach to policy formation during the first Blair administration and the subsequent uneven outcomes. This process of policy development was recognised by several elite actors, with Ryan noting: “I think Excellence in Cities probably did more than the others in reality. I think Education Action Zones, you know, it was an experiment and I think it evolved into the Excellence in Cities programme.”⁸⁸ This approach was corroborated by Barber, then Head of the DfEE’s Standards and Effectiveness Unit: “So, then Excellence in Cities which came next was actually much better and that’s because we’d learnt from mistakes, in other words we couldn’t have done Excellence in Cities without Education Action Zones.”⁸⁹ Perhaps one of the most significant outcomes of this iterative approach was the first Blair administration’s capacity to learn from experience. Instead of abandoning attempts to improve equality of opportunity through raising attainment in disadvantage urban areas after the relative failure of EAZs, it adopted a dynamic approach to policy which ultimately proved beneficial.

In contrast to secondary education, where there was no overarching or radical education policy beyond school improvement, the agenda in primary education, best characterised by the NLNS, implemented from 1998 and 1999 respectively in the form of daily literacy and

numeracy hours, was the rising tide that lifted all boats. In both academic and official evaluations, the NLNS have been found to be low-cost transformative policies which delivered significant increases in attainment. In a quantitative evaluation of the pilot programme, the National Literacy Project, Machin and McNally provided statistical evidence that found significant improvements in English at Key Stage 2 (KS2), and that at age 11, boys benefitted more than girls from the policy.⁹⁰ These significant improvements in both English at KS2, as well as the narrowing of the gender differential within English with a dividend for boys,⁹¹ and Maths are reiterated by Ofsted's assessments of the programmes.⁹² This argument was similarly advanced by Barber who oversaw the programme's implementation at the DfEE: "the literacy and numeracy stuff in primary school did benefit boys significantly because it caught everybody up to a standard and because boys were further behind than girls, they benefitted more from it."⁹³ The most notable contrast between the primary and secondary agendas in education in Blair's first term is that there was no single secondary education policy that successfully raised attainment to the same extent as the NLNS did at the primary level. It is notable then that the low-cost and universal nature of the NLNS at primary level, which was driven from the centre by the Standards and Effectiveness Unit at the DfEE, and the limited and targeted character of secondary education policies, in which LEAs and schools took the lead and received much less attention from central government, between 1997 and 2001.

The major focus on primary over secondary education during the first Blair administration can also be partially explained by key political actors being convinced of its pre-eminent position in compulsory education. This view of primary education was corroborated between multiple actors, including Lord Blunkett who advanced this perspective:

I think the evidence we were presented with was that the foundation of success was going to be early years and primary. That we could make the biggest difference, most quickly if we concentrated attention in those areas.

and,

We couldn't turn round deeply failing comprehensive schools if the primary schools and the early years before them hadn't actually done their job and done their work because otherwise those schools were always trying to play catch up.⁹⁴

Other actors, including Ryan and Barber concurred with this approach, with the former adding: "If we didn't get it right in literacy and numeracy and get those foundations right in primary school, then by the time they got into secondary school, it was often going to be too late."⁹⁵ The approach of the first Blair administration's choices in education can, with some confidence, be attributed to the perspective of key political actors that saw improvements in primary education as both where the greatest impact on attainment could be made and that this was a necessary prerequisite for the improvement of secondary education due to a system effect of primary's influence on subsequent compulsory education. While some might argue that raising attainment in primary was practicable as it was low hanging fruit, this strategy in primary education was more effective at raising attainment across the board for all pupils in England, rather than improving outcomes for disadvantaged pupils in the most deprived parts of the country only. Furthermore, this approach in primary did not preclude Blair's first administration from attempting a programme of intervention in secondary schools across the board to drive standards in a similar way it did in primary.

3.3 Conclusion

At the conclusion of Blair's first term, his administration's record in secondary education should be considered a partial success. The introduction of several high profile and substantive interventions in the secondary sector dispels the popular narrative that the first term was solely about primary education. The secondary education policies Blair's first administration implemented had varying degrees of success in improving the secondary education and attainment of white working-class boys in England. Firstly, Fresh Start made a significant impact by facilitating a major intervention in the most poorly performing secondary schools. Second, EAZs were generally considered to have underperformed. Thirdly, EiC made some improvements to the attainment of pupils in disadvantaged inner-city areas, with notable increases for boys in Maths at KS3. Lastly, the major policy initiative in primary, the NLNS, had a significant impact on attainment, which many key actors perceived as a necessary precondition for strong improvements in secondary. This overall strategy should be seen as an

attempt to create an educational landscape that was conducive to school improvement and increases in the attainment of pupils. However, the absence of an overarching idea in secondary education, resulting in an iterative approach to policy, coupled with the targeted and narrow nature of the flagship policies meant that, while they may have improved the position of some white working-class boys, any improvements were always going to be limited by the scale of these policies. These policies sought to ameliorate the detrimental effects of cross-generational disadvantage within the school gates, utilising the institution as a policy tool. However, these programmes were not as successful for white working-class boys, therefore other factors without the confines of secondary education were contributing to educational outcomes. Blair recognised that a guarantee by government of full employment was not viable and belonged to another political age, concluding that to extend equality of opportunity and social inclusion, and to improve the nation's economic performance, a strong underpinning in the basics of education was necessary. Therefore, considerable attention was given over to written English, reading comprehension and Maths which would facilitate opportunities at later stages of education and increase the potential chances of employment later in life. This approach could have benefitted low achieving white working-class boys in England disproportionately as they were starting from a position of lower attainment and made the biggest improvements.

¹ Tawney, Richard, H. *Equality* (London: Unwin Books, 1964) p. 146.

² See Lawton, D. *Education and Labour Party Ideologies: 1900 – 2001 and Beyond* (London: Routledge, 2004), Fielding, M. *Taking education really seriously: Four years hard labour* (London: Routledge, 2001), and, Abbott, I., Rathbone, M., & Whitehead, P. *Education Policy* (London: Sage Publications, 2013)

³ Chitty, C. *New Labour and Secondary Education, 1994 – 2010* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013),

⁴ Chitty, C., *Post-16 Education: Studies in Access and Achievement* (London: Kogan Page, 1991) p. 27.

⁵ Webster, P., 'Citizen Smith ends Labour backing for state control', *The Times* (London). 8 February 1993, 1.

⁶ Wynn Davies, P., 'Blair puts education at heart of his agenda', *The Independent*, 23 June 1994. Available online: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/blair-puts-education-at-heart-of-his-agenda-1424674.html> [Accessed 10/04/2022].

⁷ Rentoul, J. *Tony Blair* (London: Little, Brown and Company, 1995) p. 400.

⁸ Ibid. p. 401.

⁹ Interview with David Blunkett (Zoom, 31st March 2021).

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Chapter 4

Blair 2001 – 2007: Transforming Secondary Education?

‘Only 400,000 children. But they’re not our children. It’s always other people’s children.

None of us in this room would dream of letting our children leave school at fifteen.’

Anthony Crosland¹

In the period from 2001 to 2007, Tony Blair and New Labour would be re-elected to office twice at the 2001 and 2005 General Elections with an overall majority of 167 and 66 respectively. The sizeable majority achieved in 2001, secured a historic second full-term in government for Labour, while the 2005 victory would represent a landmark never achieved by any other Labour leader of winning three consecutive general elections. The victories at the ballot box would facilitate the implementation of a public service reform programme across domestic policy, with secondary education taking on greater priority in the years following 2001. This would be characterised by the choice and diversity agenda, and Labour’s attempts to usher in a post-comprehensive era. This chapter seeks to provide a detailed analytical narrative of the secondary education and attainment policies of the second and third Blair administrations from the 2001 general election until his resignation as Prime Minister in July 2007. I will begin by setting out broader factors that influenced the outcomes of Blair’s agenda in secondary education during this period. The first of these is the establishment of an agenda in secondary education policy with greater clarity from 2001. Followed by the role of key political actors who were driving education policy across government. Other influences on secondary education and attainment policy will be considered including both domestic and foreign concerns. The chapter will then examine the flagship policies of Blair’s second and third administrations including Academies, Specialist Schools, the London Challenge, and Raising of the Participation Age.

In the previous chapter, the argument advanced by this thesis was that Blair and New Labour, despite their work in Opposition to prepare for government, lacked an overarching idea to transition secondary education into a new era. This was characterised by many of their policies to improve the quality of secondary schools and raise attainment being limited, targeted, and

specific rather than universal in their application. From 2001 onwards, Blair had sought to change this through developing a public sector reform strategy that would also include a shift in Labour's approach to education beyond the comprehensive era. That Blair was developing this agenda is recorded in separate instances by Seldon, during the 2001 general election campaign² and once re-elected to office in 2002.³ A criticism of Blair's actions here would note that in both these instances his thinking is reactive rather than pro-active in his approach to defining Labour's thinking on secondary education reform. This approach was manifested in uncertainty over the public sector reform agenda early in Blair's second term as demonstrated by key actors in private moments, as Blunkett observed in his diary.⁴ By 2005, Blair's thinking on secondary education had become clearer and more coherent, with that year's general election manifesto containing a refined and detailed agenda that spoke to the broader strategy he sought to continue to pursue in secondary education, a stark contrast with 2001's manifesto.⁵ Throughout this period Blair's agency remained a key, but not the sole, factor in crafting Labour's thinking on secondary education as his personal contributions acted as the catalyst for the confirmation of his administrations' policy agenda. As time elapsed, the thinking behind the agenda in education was no longer an afterthought, as Blair sought to deliver public sector reforms and pursue a personal mandate in his third term.

4.1 Political actors

Across Blair's second and third administrations, there was a significant discontinuity in the primary political actors that were involved in secondary education policy across this six-year period. Following the 2001 general election, Blunkett became Home Secretary, Ryan left government, Barber became Head of the No 10 Delivery Unit, Michael Bichard, the DfEE Permanent Secretary, retired, Miliband was elected MP for South Shields, and 6 months prior the Chief Inspector of Ofsted, Chris Woodhead, had resigned. Blair's intentions for his second administration were communicated clearly shortly after forming his government.

In a July 2001 meeting, Blair told his four ministers leading key delivery departments, among them new Education Secretary Estelle Morris, that they would be in place for the entire Parliament.⁶ This would have replicated the stability of personnel that had been the backbone of success at the DfEE in his first administration. This ambition for stability in political actors in key public service departments makes the resignation of Estelle Morris particularly

pertinent. Morris' explanation for her resignation as Secretary of State for Education, that in her view she was failing to perform the role adequately, has been accepted *prima facie* by contemporary historians in several disciplines. However, the failure to interrogate this claim and their readiness to accept this justification demonstrates both the naivety of authors in other disciplines in their approach to political history and fails to provide a more rigorous account of Morris' time as Secretary of State. Morris was a skilled politician and a competent administrator who had excelled at the DfEE, with her role being upgraded from Parliamentary Under-Secretary to Minister of State for School Standards, a rare achievement for a front-line politician. She was also a highly experienced career teacher having spent nearly two decades at an inner-city secondary school in Coventry, and the first such classroom educator to have occupied the role of Secretary of State. There is also the potential that this line of argument is accepted due to the self-critical nature of the explanation given by Morris, and that no other factors could adequately account for this. Similarly, the ready acceptance of this justification would be more likely challenged if a male politician made such a resignation statement. A strong argument for Morris' resignation is the political pressure she felt emanating from Number Ten and specifically the role of Andrew Adonis as the Head of the No 10 Policy Unit who was driving the City Academies project forward.

Throughout this period, discontinuity in personnel would also impact the key post of Secretary of State for Education and Skills at the newly renamed Department for Education and Skills (DfES). Over this six-year period, four individuals were appointed to the role, averaging 18 months in office each, shared between Estelle Morris, Charles Clarke, Ruth Kelly, and Alan Johnson respectively. However, a limited degree of continuity can be found in personnel at both the DfES and in No 10. At the DfES, Morris' appointment following the 2001 general election provided a link to Blair's first administration as she served in the DfEE throughout the first term and worked closely with both Blunkett and Barber. Morris would shortly be joined by Miliband in 2002, appointed to his first post in government as Minister of State for Schools and remaining in post until his departure in 2005. Similarly, Barber's move from the DfES to lead Blair's new No 10 Delivery Unit may have weakened the department. However, it simultaneously placed one of the key contributors to Labour's approach to education, whose new role was to deliver Blair's agenda, at the centre of government. Further continuity can be found in Adonis's promotion to the Head of the No 10 Policy Unit in 2001, before being

elevated to the House of Lords in 2005 and joining the DfES as a junior Minister in the same year. A critical approach to the high turnover of personnel in this period could argue that this was evidence of further centralisation of the education agenda and a hollowing out of DfES by the removal of senior actors at the department. However, those political actors who occupied the role of Education Secretary were considerable figures, either as political heavyweights with their own standing within the Labour Party, such as Clarke, or were well regarded by their peers and tipped for future success, such as Kelly and Johnson.

4.2 Domestic and foreign

In literature concerning the New Labour project, there is a view that political actors within the party during the first term were primarily concerned with maintaining economic competence to secure a second term. This was an end in itself to avoid being “knocked off course” by economic headwinds, as had been the case with previous Labour governments who were subsequently defeated at the ballot box. By 2001, Blair and New Labour had successfully seen off this potential risk and achieved further electoral success. However, there is a parallel argument that after the events of September 2001 and the onset of the conflicts in Afghanistan later in the same year and in Iraq in 2003, that Blair’s second term up to 2005 was dominated by foreign policy to the detriment of his domestic agenda. Given the prominent role of foreign policy post-2001, it is reasonable to question the capacity of Blair’s government to make substantial progress in secondary education policy, given the limited resources of government to implement his agenda, and whether Blair’s agenda in education was disadvantaged by his government’s focus on foreign policy.

There is no consensus of views across the political actors involved in education policy between 2001 and 2007, with some taking diametrically opposed positions. Charles Clarke, who was Education Secretary from 2002 to 2004 covering the beginning of the Iraq War, was sceptical of the view that attention was diverted from domestic to foreign policy, arguing that this did not affect the political focus on Blair’s second administration, remarking that:

I simply don’t think ... that because we were involved in the Iraq War or in other foreign conflicts, somehow political attention, political focus was removed from

what was going on in education, health or whatever it might be, and I simply don't think that's true at all, and I don't think it could be substantiated.⁷

In a similar vein as Clarke, Conor Ryan, Blair's Senior Education Adviser in No 10 between 2005 and 2007, reflected that Blair personally was fully briefed and across the detail of his government's domestic policies. Ryan demonstrated this by recalling Blair's role during the passage of the 2005 Education Bill through the House of Commons. A contentious policy issue was raised by Labour Party backbench MPs, which was successfully navigated by the Prime Minister. Reflecting on Blair's third term, Ryan noted: "I can certainly say between 05 and 07, where he needed to be focused on education and where he had to address the issues, he was absolutely, totally, a hundred percent on those issues."⁸

In contrast to Clarke and Ryan's view, David Miliband adopted a markedly different position in an interview with the author who remarked that "Well, they [the events of 9/11 and the Iraq War] took the Prime Minister's attention away and they obviously made us much less popular after two thousand and three. So, I think that there was undoubtedly a diversion of attention."⁹ This demonstrates the contested nature of the impact of foreign policy on Blair's domestic agenda, with political actors present in the DfES and No 10 holding significantly different perspectives.

Separately, Estelle Morris, Education Secretary between 2001 and 2002, recounted a conversation on this topic with her then Minister of State for Schools, David Miliband, about the shifting focus of government:

I remember David saying to me that maybe we're just going to have to come to terms with the fact that we had grown up at a time when the focus was on domestic policy but maybe the focus in politics would move back to foreign affairs.¹⁰

Following the interviews with key political actors of this period, it is possible to discern at least three distinct perspectives, or levels, of a government's capacity to pursue its domestic and foreign agendas simultaneously. Firstly, on a government wide basis, the capacity to drive the

implementation of its domestic agenda; second, at a personal level, the capability of the Prime Minister to master the detail of a broad range of policy despite competing demands; and third, a long-term, generational tension of the prominence of domestic and foreign policy. While the Prime Minister's personal capability to lead for the Government in matters of education is not seriously questioned by the testimony of other political actors, the diversity of views amongst political actors in Blair's second administration over the question of political focus and attention during this period is indicative of a broader dispute over the emerging agenda in education during this time.

4.3 Academies

The period between 2001 and 2007 was crucial for the secondary education and attainment policy towards white working-class boys in England, as the academies programme would transform from being a minor policy driven by Andrew Adonis in 2001 and becoming one of Blair's major educational legacies by the time he left office. Previous historians of education have concluded that the academies programme led to the marketisation of England's school system but have failed to assess the efficacy of academies in improving attainment. In contrast, scholars utilising quantitative methods have correctly identified the impact on pupil attainment as a significant issue and, to a large extent, concluded that the academies programme up to 2010 had a positive impact on the attainment of pupils. The disagreement amongst the latter is over the extent to which the relationship impacted pupils' overall attainment, the changing composition of academies intake, and which cohort benefitted from this change to England's secondary school structure. However, these authors have failed to acknowledge the broader qualitative element to the historiography. By utilising existing literature and original interview material with elite political actors, a fuller perspective of the place of academies in the secondary education and attainment policy towards white working-class boys can be facilitated.

The development of the Blair Government's approach to secondary education and attainment were part of a broader attempt, initiated in 2000 but coming to fruition between 2001 and

2007 during Blair's second and third terms,^a to decisively move Labour away from the panacea of the comprehensive school and into a "post-comprehensive era".¹¹ The Labour Party's thinking had been dominated by comprehensivisation for the majority of the second half of the twentieth century and had not developed beyond this. A speech delivered by Blunkett in March 2000 was a step-change in rhetoric and a first step towards establishing a new policy framework.¹² This was formalised by the publication of a Green Paper by the DfEE in February 2001, *Schools: Building on Success*, which prepared the political ground by setting out the Government's plans for a potential second term and framing the plans in a public narrative that linked the achievements of the first term as a foundation for a prospective second term. The chapter entitled 'Transforming Secondary Education' speaks to the themes and policy measures planned, which included: diversity in secondary provision; raising standards at Key Stage 3; and 14 to 19 reform.¹³ Following the 2001 General Election, this was reaffirmed by new Education Secretary, Estelle Morris, and published in a DfES White Paper, *Schools: Achieving Success*.¹⁴

The turn of the millennium saw the introduction of City Academies. Announced in a major set piece speech by Blunkett at the Social Market Foundation and placed on a statutory basis by the *Learning and Skills Act 2000*, this was New Labour's "radical approach"¹⁵ to education policy. The academies were introduced late into Blair's first term and only became a meaningful strand of the Government's education agenda following the second consecutive general election victory in 2001 with the first new City Academy opening in 2002. As such, it is appropriate to evaluate the academy programme in this chapter. In short, academies were intended as all-ability, state schools, independent of local authority control, funded directly by central government, accountable to the DfES and primarily located in deprived urban areas. The *Education Act 2002* simplified the institutions name to academies and permitted them be established in any area. Academies would go on to become the most significant strand of New Labour's secondary education and attainment agenda, with Gordon Brown's decision, once he had succeeded Blair as Prime Minister, to continue the programme confirming the preeminent status of the policy. Although the number of academies started slowly, with only

^a Blair's commitment to modernising the comprehensive principle can be traced back to Opposition. However, this was largely a rhetorical device with his first administration focusing on raising standards in comprehensive schools rather than making a decisive break in the structure of England's secondary education system.

87 opened by the time Blair left office in September 2007 and 203 at the time of the 2010 General Election.

This new classification of school was notable in several core aspects of school management. First, academies would have greater autonomy than existing maintained secondary schools, as they would be self-managing rather than placed under the remit of Local Education Authorities. Second, academies were to be established with a supporting sponsor. Initially, sponsors were required to contribute up to a maximum of £2 million in capital for facilities, albeit this was later dropped. Third, academies would have greater freedom over day-to-day management and operational issues such as the curriculum, staff pay and conditions and the school day.

As the most significant secondary education and attainment programme of New Labour's time in office, academies have been the subject of extensive research interest with academic publications,¹⁶ official reports,¹⁷ and appraisals commissioned by government.¹⁸ Despite the proliferation of research of the efficacy of academies in several disciplines and official circles, two aspects of these evaluations should be made explicit. Firstly, research considering the success of the academies programme will be limited to the impact of those academies established pre-2010 under the Labour government. Second, there is limited scope given the relatively small sample size of academies established and the natural lag that is built into education for substantive results to be produced.

Amongst the existing academic literature on academies, it is the involvement of sponsors, many from the private sector or individual benefactors¹⁹ and the provision for academies to act as their own admissions authorities, which included the power to select up to 10% of pupils on ability, which is considered to be most controversial and is a common line of argument amongst critics of academies.²⁰ Chitty and Tomlinson critique the programme, seeking to prosecute the marketisation thesis of England's secondary education system. This line of argument should be treated with scepticism as it attempts to provide a single all-encompassing explanation of New Labour's secondary education and attainment policies and fails to acknowledge discontinuities with preceding administrations, tensions within Labour's strategy, and competing narratives such as those around centralisation and local management

of schools over the 13-year period. An overreliance on the market narrative leads critics of New Labour's agenda to approach the academy programme as a pejorative, emphasising the private element of sponsorship, despite the overwhelming source of funding coming from central government.²¹ These same critics similarly fail to interrogate the role of other sponsors as thoroughly, with public and third sector organisations establishing academies as well as faith groups and educational agencies.²² Lastly, the argument put forward by these critics is less persuasive when compared to the findings of quantitative studies that establish a positive relationship between academy status and improvements in attainment. The line of argument concerning claims around the composition of the pupil body at academies is strongly rebuffed by an NAO report. The NAO's 2007 report, *The Academies Programme*, outlines figures that academies schools' admittance of a higher proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals, of those with special educational needs, and those with a lower prior attainment that live in the catchment area. The improvements in attainment attributed to academies then cannot be ascribed simply to the selection of pupils on ability.²³

It should be noted that within the literature, there are authors who are liable to reveal their judgement and commitments when considering the nature of secondary education in England during this period. This is evident in the work of authors such as Chitty, who arguably maintains a polemical focus on the structure of England's secondary education system, without accounting for other key government policies and initiatives such as the Key Stage 3 strategies, one of the most significant but ignored issues in secondary education where many pupils fail to make the expected progress in their studies. It is notable that, historians in education departments roundly criticise the developments of England's education system and particularly its secondary school system, arguing that diverse avenues should be closed off, while the political actors they critique are willing to pursue school improvement by almost any means to achieve improved outcomes for pupils.²⁴

Amongst the key political actors in this period, there was a shared political outlook within New Labour's approach to secondary education that the independence of state secondary schools in England from Local Education Authorities could act as a catalyst for school improvement and increases in attainment. This was underpinned by New Labour's revisionist approach to secondary education policy in order to achieve improvements in attainment. This approach

also had the benefit of bypassing political actors in key roles within the Labour Party who subscribed to New Left politics, the most well-known manifestation of which is the Parliamentary Labour Party's Socialist Campaign Group, in Labour controlled local authorities. This is partly influenced by the role of the education trade unions in the Labour Party's history, which have held a significant role since at least 1945 and the onset of the debate about the tripartite system and multilateral schools. This political standpoint is common within the Labour Party and, despite being progressive in appearance, embodies an element of small 'c' conservatism with its prioritisation of means over ends and refusal to acknowledge the failure of an idealised secondary education system in England. This was evident as early as Blair's first term, with Adonis making clear that he was against grant-maintained schools being brought back under the remit of local government²⁵ and reiterated this stance to the author.²⁶ A similar approach is echoed by Blunkett, who also highlights New Labour's prioritisation of improvements in secondary education by accepting revision to policy:

So, we thought that what was sensible from the nineteen eighty-eight changes that Ken Baker had brought in was a greater autonomy and responsibility, and therefore accountability for headteachers and leaders in school, and therefore what was then called the local management of schools. We felt that the changes that had been brought about with grant-maintained schools was a phase too far because it separated out the schools into unnecessary categories, but we knew that simply saying we're going to abolish this was old style. Let's go backwards, let's always be nostalgic, let's reflect on the past rather than learning from it and moving to the future. So, that's why we said let's adopt the best of this and call them foundation schools, let's accelerate the autonomy which eventually led to the Academy schools.²⁷

Other key political actors throughout this period of Blair's premiership offered accounts in interview that reaffirmed this approach of utilising school independence to bypass recalcitrant local authorities that were considered by some in New Labour to be part of the problem.²⁸ The extent and longevity of this problem including amongst Labour controlled local authorities is recounted by Johnson:

Education was always something that Labour had a problem with internally. There was so many teachers in the Labour Party, there was such a view of the good old days that, you know, we ought to go back to. I mean there was a failure to recognise that schools had been failing very much on the Left. There was a guy called Max Bird, who was an ex-teacher, a Labour councillor, and he was the Chair of the education authority in Hull. And Max just didn't want any change at all. I remember John Prescott sitting next to me. I was Education Secretary, he was Deputy Prime Minister, we had all the Hull City Council around, we wanted to spend millions on Building Schools for the Future, but they had to get out of their inertia and accept that there was going to be some academies in Hull. Not every school, but some schools had to be academies. I remember John telling this Max Bird: "My two sons grew up in Hull. They went to your lousy secondary schools. They experienced the lousy quality of teaching. They experienced the lousy results from it. Don't tell me about how great our education system is" because they were saying everything in the past was good.²⁹

Two of the earliest official evaluations of the academies programme were carried out by the NAO: firstly in a 2006 report, *Improving poorly performing schools in England*, and in a 2007 report specifically on academies. The first noted that, although it was too early to assess the cost-effectiveness of academies, their results were continuing to improve with results in KS3 Maths and English improving at a rate of 9%, compared to the national average of 7% and 6% respectively.³⁰ The second report, *The Academies Programme*, was clear in its assessment that academies were increasing attainment at GCSE with improved performance compared to predecessor schools, and rising at a faster rate than in other comparable schools in similar circumstances. Most significantly once pupil level data, including prior attainment and characteristics was accounted for, academies were achieving significantly improved GCSE results, on average, compared to other schools.³¹ Although the NAO added the caveat that all pupils at that stage sitting GCSEs in academies had previously spent time in other schools. The view was also present amongst political actors, who were convinced of the efficacy of the academies as a major policy initiative to provide a route to improving quality and standards, and thereby raise attainment. Alan Johnson, Blair's final Secretary of State for Education and Skills before departing as Prime Minister, was continuing to make the case for academies,

remarking in a speech to the Fabian Society that: “Academies are improving at three times the overall national rate, despite having twice the number of children on free school meals.”³²

The positive impact of the Academies programme on attainment is an outcome reiterated by other appraisals, such as the DfES commissioned annual assessment by PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC). Conducted annually over a five-year period from 2003. PwC’s fifth and final report published in 2008, found that the academies programme was delivering overall improvements to pupils’ academic attainment. This was similarly reflected in responses from key political actors. When reflecting on the performance of the academy programme, Charles Clarke, Secretary of State for Education and Skills between 2002 and 2004, argued that:

None of the schools I went to, and I visited a very large number of schools, would I call bog standard, and many of them were fighting very particular problems. That’s why I supported the Academy programme for a limited number, about two hundred schools in the country, where there were areas of entrenched educational under performance, where we needed to try and find some way of moving it out.³³

And when asked about the success of the diversity and choice initiatives, such as the academies programme, in improving standards and attainment added:

I think there’s no doubt that our Academy programme did [improve standards and attainment in deprived areas], in the areas in which it was talking about, a small number of areas of the country, provide what we thought of as a booster shot to improve educational performance in those areas. I haven’t got the statistics to hand but I think you’d find a number of very strong examples of that ... I would say they were successful in improving performance and getting focus and ethos.³⁴

This view was reiterated by Conor Ryan, who between 2005 and the end of Blair’s time in government was the Prime Minister’s Senior Education Adviser:

When it came to schools I think we were trying to ensure that we were building on successes that were already starting to show on things like London Challenge and the early academies. What Tony Blair was very keen to ensure was that those programmes continued to proceed at pace and I think the reason he wanted to see them at pace was because he wanted to address what had been years of under attainment, particularly in secondary education in urban areas, including in London.³⁵

In the quantitative study, PwC utilised four separate measures to assess the impact of academies programme on attainment.³⁶ First, a comparison to the national average for English secondary schools; second and third are two Comparison Groups composed of schools with the 15% and 10% lowest prior attainment at KS2; and lastly, schools where there is an Overlapping Intake Schools (OIS).^b The study also distinguished between *level of performance* and *improvements in performance*,^c a key measure as to the progress academies made to the attainment of pupils. At KS3, the *level of performance* of pupils attending academies in English, Maths and Science, performed better than the two Comparison Groups, but not as well as OIS and were below the national average in England. One of the most significant variables in this measure was the substantial variations in performance of academies.³⁷ Looking at the average annual *improvement in performance* across all academies, PwC found that in English, Maths and Science at KS3, academies achieved greater improvements in all three subjects than all four of the above benchmarks, the most noteworthy achieving a higher rate than the national average across all schools in England.³⁸ Similarly, beginning with *level of performance* at the end of KS4, academies had 48% of pupils achieving five GCSEs at grades A to E across all subjects, which was lower than OIS and England's national average. However, it was slightly higher than their Comparison Group schools. When the five GCSEs include English and Maths, this dropped to 27%, compared to the national average across England of 46%.³⁹ This contrasts markedly with the average annual *level of improvement* amongst pupils who achieve five GCSEs at grades A to E across all subjects, with the average academy improving by 8%, which

^b These are secondary schools with admissions of pupils from feeder primary schools which overlap to a considerable extent with those of an Academy's predecessor school.

^c This is the change in the percentage of a schools' pupils achieving Level 5 or above in English, Maths and Science in each year they have been open as an Academy, compared to the predecessor schools' performance in its final year.

outstrips all comparison groups. When English and Maths are included in the 5 GCSEs, the academy average is 5%, with only 2% for Comparison Group schools and 1% average nationally.⁴⁰ The extent of improvements in attainment was inconsistent across both different stages of assessment and between academies. Looking at the average annual improvement in attainment across all academies, the progress of pupils from KS2 to GCSE was better than the national average, albeit this effect was not as strong between KS2 and KS3. In summary then, the longitudinal study by PwC identified the impact of academisation of schools was more varied and complex but with stronger performances in improving attainment.⁴¹

Later studies of the academies programme up to 2010, from authors at think tanks such as Eyles et al. at the Education Policy Institute would support the NAO and PwC findings, concluding that there is a strong relationship between academy status and improvements in educational attainment at GCSE, equivalent to one grade at GCSE in five separate subjects four years after becoming an academy. It similarly finds that performance amongst academies was variable, from improvement equivalent to one grade in seven individual GCSE subjects to detrimental of one grade in four separate GCSE subjects.⁴² Similarly, a report authored by academics at the University of London's Institute for Education, measuring the success of the academies programme against the original objectives of the policy, adopts a dissenting view and is more sceptical of the impact of academies on attainment. While acknowledging that average attainment at academies did improve, this is qualified by noting that, in some cases, the composition of academies intake changed. Despite recognising that academies at the time had twice the national average number of pupils eligible for Free School Meals (FSM), the authors specifically point to the relative decline in the proportion of pupils in receipt of FSM.⁴³ The question of intent in relation to the academies programme and its later direction has also been raised as an issue and is a view shared by David Miliband:

I mean we made a political decision, but also at some level a policy decision to avoid the structures stuff and that was very tactical in the nineties, I think probably, and then we returned to it, it was returned to with the idea of the academies which then got, sort of, mutated or instead of being an answer to what wasn't working they became a single transferable solution to everything which wasn't the point.⁴⁴

In a quantitative study, Machin and Wilson dispute the findings of the final PwC report and question the statistical validity of their evaluation, arguing that as academies were the lowest performing schools in the LEA, comparing them to the national average is undermined by mean reversion, whereby a school at the bottom of the performance table are statistically more likely to return to the mean average attainment for the local area, irrespective of their status. Instead, Machin et al. argue that a more accurate assessment of the relationship between academy status and attainment can be found by measuring academies against other similar schools that were: performing poorly, did not become academies and would revert to the mean average. When accounting for these comparable schools and trends in GCSE attainment prior to academy status, the evidence suggests a much weaker link between the academy status and improvements in attainment. However, Machin et al. conclude by stating that it was too early to fully evaluate the impact of the academies programme on improvements in GCSE performance.⁴⁵ In a later quantitative study, Machin and Vernoit demonstrated that academies which had been open for at least two years had made significant improvements to GCSE attainment when compared to a group of schools that shared similar characteristics prior to becoming an academy to those that had converted status. The authors also note that they could not find any significant improvement in GCSE performance for academy schools which had been open for less than two years and note that this is a potential explanation for why their earlier paper could find no positive relationship between academy status and improvements in attainment.⁴⁶ The time lag in substantive changes in performance of the academies is recognised by political actors who held key roles in the delivery of education, with Michael Barber, then overseeing the delivery of public services from Downing Street, voicing a similar opinion:

The academy programme was only really just getting going in the second term, so it benefitted those schools that became academies but they were, I don't know how many there were at the end of the second term, but I doubt there were more than a hundred, I might be wrong, you will know the data, but they were only just getting going and then Andrew went to become a DfE minister in two thousand and five and then the programme built up. So, the second term, it's hard to attribute much of the growth in outcomes to academies. You've always got to, and

this is a policy challenge for you, especially when you're doing research, you've got to look at the timelines. You do something and the result comes, not necessarily immediately.⁴⁷

In summary, academies successfully challenged the underperformance of secondary schools in deprived areas. By replacing what were effectively secondary modern schools, academies delivered as good an education as could reasonably be expected anywhere else in the country. Although this may sound like a modest achievement, for those in the catchment area of an academy, this could be the difference between achieving a GCSE in English and Maths, and subsequently finding employment.

4.4 Specialist Schools

The second of Blair's flagship school improvement policies during the period 2001 to 2007 was the Specialist Schools programme. Under the Blair governments of this period, Specialist Schools were pre-existing state secondary schools who, following an application process to the DfES, had successfully fulfilled the eligibility criteria to have a subject specialism. The eligibility criteria included providing a development plan covering four academic years, demonstrating overall rising standards of attainment and raising private sponsorship, which from the outset of the Specialist Schools programme was set at £100,000 before being reduced to £50,000 in September 2000, and could be sourced from the private sector, an individual benefactor, and charitable foundations. Following DfES approval, schools would receive £100,000 capital grant and £100 per pupil for a three-year period, incrementally increasing to £129 and over four years respectively across the decade from 1997.

Although this specific policy initiative pre-dated Blair by some years, with the policy's origins being found in the form of City Technology Colleges under Margaret Thatcher before being amended and re-introduced as a measure to convert existing local authority secondary schools in 1993 by John Major's second administration. In Blair and Blunkett's search for means to fulfil the ends of secondary school improvement, Sir Cyril Taylor fostered a good relationship with the leadership of New Labour after meeting both in Opposition,⁴⁸ resulting in the adoption of the Specialist Schools programme as Labour Party policy,⁴⁹ albeit this did not yet include a commitment to the expansion of the programme in government.⁵⁰ This form

of events has been corroborated by political actors close to the then leadership of the Labour Party, with Blunkett's advisor Ryan noting in a 2004 article that Blunkett had supported specialist schools since February 1996⁵¹ and reiterated this in an interview with the author:

So, I think on the secondary agenda what we tried to do was develop what some saw as a new type of comprehensive. I think I remember the Evening Standard in 1996 put this on the front page and we used the specialist school model in part to do that before government.⁵²

Although adopted in Opposition in 1996 and introduced in Blair's first term in government in the *Excellence in Schools* White Paper,⁵³ the policy was one strand of a broader strategy of more limited measures seeking to improve England's secondary schools. The number of specialist schools was gradually increased and could not be described as a flagship policy of the first Blair administration's approach to secondary education. Prior to the June 2001 general election, from the academic year beginning in September 2000 there were 529 operational specialist schools. The Blair Government's commitment to the programme was reiterated in the Green Paper *Schools: Building on Success*⁵⁴ and in the post-election White Paper *Schools: Achieving Success*.⁵⁵ Post-election, this had increased to 681 from September 2001, equivalent to around 20% of all secondary schools in England.⁵⁶ Following Estelle Morris' resignation, Charles Clarke became Secretary of State for Education and Skills and shortly after published *A New Specialist System: Transforming Secondary Education* which opened up the programme to all secondary schools in England, and on reflection in an interview with the author commented:

In secondary schools, the idea that I was strongly in favour of, in fact I did it immediately when I became Secretary of State, was to encourage all schools to develop a specialism so they became specialist schools in the particular area they decided was right for them ... I thought the idea of specialism at secondary schools could take us a long way forward in that area.⁵⁷

And when later questioned about the success of the policy on improving standards and attainment added:

I actually thought that specialist schools as they were first set up, tended to be promoting competition between the schools, in saying only certain schools could be specialist schools, and I didn't think that was the right approach. So, one of the first things I did was to establish a system where all schools had the capacity to become specialist schools.⁵⁸

Although this was not a universal view across the political actors within the Labour Party of the time, and demonstrates the tensions between the policy's original intent and what it later developed into, as voiced by Conor Ryan:

So, I think my view on the specialist schools was, it was a mistake to try make all schools specialist because then by definition you haven't really got the right degree of focus. I think the programme had real potential when you were talking about several hundred specialist schools that were acting as hubs for particular subjects. So, I think it lost its way a bit when every school became specialist, so I think that was a bit of a challenge.⁵⁹

Despite this tension, the extension of specialist schools across England continued and by the time Blair left government in September 2007 there were 2803 specialist schools accounting for 80% of English secondary schools.

The academic and official literature evaluating the efficacy of the specialist schools policy in increasing attainment is mature and well developed with major contributions from qualitative narrative history and quantitative studies. In order to assess the policy, it is the latter body of work which will be explored.

Qualitative literature charts the administrative development and delivery of the policy, with the main analytical claim concerning the continuity from the Thatcher and Major governments to Blair, and traditional Labour left issues such as selection despite only 6 to 7% of schools opting to exercise the 10% of admission selecting on ability. The quantitative body of work includes investigations and subsequent discourse between authors attempting to

determine a relationship between specialist school status and its impact on attainment. Early studies found that specialist schools were outperforming comprehensives in GCSE outcomes, for instance, Jesson concluded that 53% of pupils at specialist schools were achieving five GCSEs at grades A* - C compared to 43% for comprehensive schools in England. Similarly, in an assessment of value-added by specialist schools, that is measured by comparing GCSE outcomes with predicted performance levels by utilising both key stages 2 and 3 results, Jesson found that pupils at specialist schools did perform marginally better.⁶⁰ Jesson would reach similar conclusions in a series of annual reports.⁶¹ Further evaluations by Schagen et al. found an overall positive impact, albeit this benefit was only small and varied by specialism, with the exception of sports schools.⁶² Ofsted's first evaluation of the specialist schools programme concurred with these findings, noting that four out of five schools were achieving the aims of the programme and that more pupils were achieving five GCSEs at grades A* - C and A* - G than schools nationally, with the exception of sports specialism.⁶³ A 2003 study by the NAO found that on average specialist schools performed marginally better, with higher pupil attainment at KS3 and at GCSE.⁶⁴ Levačić and Jenkins' comparative appraisal of the effectiveness of specialist schools and non-specialist found that the former, on average, made a value-added contribution of 1.4 GCSE grades. Their investigation also found that boys attending specialist schools achieved a value added of 1.8 grades compared to 1.3 for girls, and had almost 3% greater probability of achieving five GCSEs at grades A* - C. Furthermore, the performance attainment gap between boys and girls was narrower at specialist schools.⁶⁵

The key analytical claim in an assessment of the impact of increased resources on educational attainment by Pugh et al. is that there is a significant but limited effect. Pugh et al. note that the effect of increased expenditure is lower in specialist schools but that there is an overall positive effect. However, it is their comments regarding the disruptive influence of schools preparing to apply for specialist status on their investigations results which are most interesting. The authors propose that the transitional period, which they label the 'anticipatory' hypothesis, sees schools enter a period of concentrated and intense effort in preparation for their application resulting in improved performance followed by a period of weaker application following successful specialist designation.⁶⁶

This is corroborated by political actors who held positions across Blair's administrations and is a common view amongst them, including Estelle Morris, who when asked to reflect on the role of the specialist schools initiative and its impact on attainment, finds that this intensification of effort in preparation for specialist status to be a valuable part of the programme:

Number Ten felt that the reason that specialist schools were successful is because their specialism gave them a badge of difference. It gave them a unique characteristic. So, you got away from the sameness of the comprehensive school and it also allowed parents to choose a school that suited their child because they would have a specialism that, you know, could be suitable for their child. I think that was marginal. I think what was successful about specialist schools was the things you had to do to get to be a specialist school. So, it was the process not the label that was successful. So, if you look at what you had to do to get a specialist school, you had to improve your leadership of the school and the leadership of the department. You had to have a clear plan for improving the quality of teaching and learning, and you had to work with others. Now, if you do that it doesn't matter what status you are, that's the essence of improving outcomes, and I felt it was much more a brilliant focus on getting schools to improve the teaching and learning, 'cos the thing I always looked at, say you're a specialist maths school, the standards improved not just in maths but across all the subjects. Well, why was that? It wasn't because they were maths specialists, it was because it was the whole school had gone through that process of concentrating on pedagogy and on teaching and learning. So, I was a believer in specialist schools, I think they were a good thing and they also, you know, we'd then introduced the idea of having to work with other schools, so it played to that partnership as well. It was a combination of pedagogy and partnership and I think that's pretty good partnership.⁶⁷

A similar sentiment was expressed by David Miliband, Minister of State for Schools during this period:

I mean, we really thought that specialist schools, people I think misunderstood what specialist schools were about in that, it wasn't saying well if you become a technology college everyone there does technology. The idea was that you forced a really hard reckoning with issues of pedagogy and the specialist schools movement I think has, kind of, slightly been airbrushed out by the arguments about academies but I think it did force hard thinking about the way teaching was being done, and I think the results were actually pretty good for it.⁶⁸

As did Conor Ryan:

Although I still think it was a shame that the programme didn't continue after 2010 because the one thing that the programme did, which goes back to the cultural change, it wasn't so much what was your specialism but the fact that you had to prepare a business plan to get the support to be a specialist school and quite often had to engage with sponsors as well and bring in some external support, maybe get business involved and working with the school. It was a combination of those things that was quite important, and I think the specialist school programme heralded the sort of improvements in leadership, and school leadership, which were crucial to reforms and the developments that came afterwards. So, I think the programme was really important in bringing that cultural change into schools and still has a legacy in that. I mean, if you look at the calibre of Headteachers there are in secondary schools now or those that are leading academies or academy chains or whatever, they owe their origins really to what was developed through that specialist school movement and it was a very powerful movement. I remember Tony Blair making his last big secondary speech on schools to the annual specialist schools conference. You know, it was a big event, and a really buzzing sort of event, where people were thinking about how to share practice in school improvement. So, I think there was a real movement there and I think it was a shame that the power of that movement wasn't able to continue.⁶⁹

Whereas Michael Barber, then Head of the Delivery Unit in Downing Street, places it in a broader context:

I think that specialist schools were good actually, they had started with the, well we're going back to John Major actually and then we built that programme up a lot in the first term. That was generally speaking a very good policy. It gave schools a bit of identity, a sort of theme, something to build round and I visited lots of specialist schools. I used to speak, not annually but quite regularly, at the sports specialist schools event, which was fantastic, and the sports specialist schools did well in sport, but they also did well academically because it gave a kind of motivation and all of that. So, I think that was a good programme.⁷⁰

4.5 London Challenge

The third flagship policy of the Blair governments strategy to improve secondary education in England was the London Challenge. Originally announced in 2002 by Morris, and to be headed up by Professor Tim Brighouse, the first policy document setting out the programme, *Transforming London Secondary Schools*,⁷¹ was published in 2003 by her successor Charles Clarke. The document set out the London Challenge's aims and objectives, key aspects of the initiative and the priorities for achieving them. The policy sought to deliver significant improvements in attainment for schools in England's capital. It was composed of several strands, rather than one single policy solution for failing secondary schools, focused on pertinent areas such as the quality of leadership, teaching and learning, facilities, and culture, among many others.

The original impetus behind the Challenge was the perception of a crisis in London's provision of state secondary education, particularly the quality of teaching and in low educational attainment. Political actors active in the period under investigation make clear in their recollections that London's secondary schools were the worst in the country. This was certainly the view of Clarke:

Well, there was a sense that schools were really failing in London, and if you look at the statistics before London Challenge it was at the bottom of many national league tables from this point of view. So, there was that but also there's a problem which is a disease of the educational system, which is what's happening in London

is what's really happening to the people in the Westminster bubble, and that's a significant problem actually rather than a good thing. We went to try and address it because there was a perception that schools in London really were failing, the education system in London really was failing, that's why we chose it. And it was a more acute sense of that in London, than it was elsewhere in the country.⁷²

This view is corroborated by Ryan:

I think it's now, sort of, acknowledged that London unlike a lot of similar capital cities in other parts of the developed world has actually seen a real improvement as a result of what happened in those years. Now, I think a lot of the groundwork had been done, as I said earlier, in the work that David did both in Opposition and government, and these things take time and I think this is one of the things that, it helps if Secretary of State's got continuity, I mean, David was lucky in having four years but that was unusual and actually really to see these sort of improvements come to fruition you need ten or twelve years and I think that was witnessed by what happened with London schools because London schools were seen as being a basket case in the mid-nineties and there was a transformation that took place through the combined effect of with what happened with literacy and numeracy, and programmes like London Challenge.⁷³

A view that is also shared by Miliband:

We then did really important work around the London Challenge and tackling geographic disadvantage. I mean London went from being the lowest performing region in education to, I think, the highest performing.⁷⁴

Other determining factors in choosing London as the beneficiary of this intense focus were pointed to by political actors, including its role as a component of the Blair government's political communication strategy as an opportunity to demonstrate the impact of the government's education policy to the London-based national media outlets, with Barber remarking:

I think we definitely, it certainly came personally from Blair but supported by Andrew [Adonis] and me and others, that London, London was, it's easy to forget now, was a ruefully underperforming system in the mid-nineteen nineties and Blair used to say it and what's more, all the journalists lived here so that's what they see. So, unless we improve London, they'll never notice that we've improved the system. So, there was a kind of, there was a, I suppose you'd call it, broadly speaking, a political motivation as well as an objective educational motivation to do that.⁷⁵

Other motivations behind the policy were highlighted by Andrew Adonis, which included preventing parents and middle-class professionals from leaving the state secondary sector in favour of private education, with a strategy of school improvement across London that extended to some boroughs having a majority of new secondary schools.⁷⁶

It is therefore necessary to test this claim by revisiting GCSE results from when Blair took office to the immediate period before the commencement of the programme in 2003. Reviewing the statistical publications in the five years prior to the announcement of the London Challenge programme, on the measure of the percentage of 15-year-old pupils in all Maintained Schools from the end of 1997/98,⁷⁷ 1998/99,⁷⁸ 1999/00,⁷⁹ 2000/01⁸⁰ to 2001/02⁸¹ who achieved five GCSE or GNVQ equivalent at grades A* - C, the Inner London Boroughs is the consistently lowest performing statistical area. However, on this same measure, the consistently lowest performing single LEA over this same period is Kingston-Upon-Hull.

There have been several appraisals of the London Challenge programme with the majority of authors making positive conclusions. In 2006, Ofsted reported that standards in low performing schools had improved faster than comparable schools nationally. Attainment had also made considerable progress with 89% of Inner London schools achieving five GCSE grades at A* - C compared with 73% of secondary schools in England. This was further evidenced by inspections with a greater proportion of London schools being graded good or better for their effectiveness than nationally.⁸² In a follow up evaluation in 2010 after the conclusion of the programme, Ofsted reported similar findings with London's secondary schools outperforming

schools nationally on the measure of five GCSEs at grades A* - C, with inspection data further highlighting the improvement in London's secondary schools.⁸³ The positive impact of the London Challenge is supported by Hutchings and Mansaray, whose reports cite the programme as the central factor that is responsible for the improvements in attainment in London from 2003 to 2013.⁸⁴ Similarly, they also report that a higher percentage of pupils in London secondary schools achieved above the expected levels of attainment than was the case nationally.⁸⁵ A later evaluation of the programme, published in 2014 by the CfBT Education Trust and the Centre for London, demonstrated the journey of London's secondary schools from the having the lowest GCSE results in the late 1990s to the best performing by early 2010s. Crucially, the research demonstrates that the lower-performing schools in London between 2001 and 2013 have outperformed secondary schools nationally.⁸⁶

The perception amongst political actors of the time is that the improvement in educational attainment can be directly attributed to the critical success of the London Challenge programme which, on reflection by Clarke, had not been sufficiently replicated in other parts of England:

It was an extraordinary thing, which if you look, I've got the figures in there, the change in performance of schools in London was quite extraordinary and we did it by a whole variety of means which I won't recapitulate what's in that lecture. But I think it was not widely enough understood what had been achieved in this area, that's what I was saying. I think it was a great achievement. There were efforts to do similar challenge approaches in other areas, which were not quite as successful, and there's a good discussion to be had about how it succeeded or failed, but I think it's incontrovertible that it was a success in improving outcomes for children in London compared to what had been the situation before. That doesn't help you in Halifax or Hull as such, but it raised the question, what are the techniques that were used in the London Challenge which did succeed, and which could succeed elsewhere, and I list in the lecture those points. In terms of your fundamental interest, social mobility, that is an absolutely core question. The problem about schools in London, before the London Challenge, was that there many who were kind of discarded to failure, much too early on in their school life

and career. In practice, I don't mean anyone took that decision obviously but in practice that was the position. It was widely said to me, when I became an MP, before I was Secretary of State, there's nothing we can do with these children, it's all the parents, there's nothing we can do as a school. To which, my obvious answer is, well why are you a teacher then? I mean, at the end of the day, you've got to believe you can make a difference in those situations.⁸⁷

4.6 Raising the Participation Age

The fourth policy that of Blair's premiership from 2001 to 2007 is that of Raising the Participation Age (RPA). Although of considerably lower profile than the previous three, it is arguably the one with the greatest impact on the secondary education system in England. The Raising of the School Leaving Age (ROSLA) is an historically significant objective of the Labour Party, with incremental increases being placed on a statutory basis in the 1944 Butler Act as devised by the wartime coalition government but never fully implemented. The ROSLA holds a contentious place in the political history of the Labour Party, most infamously in the decision by the Cabinet of Harold's Wilson's second administration voting for the deferment of ROSLA to 16 in 1967 in the wake of devaluation, the debate from which this chapter's opening quote is taken, and which was subsequently implemented by Conservative Prime Minister Edward Heath in 1972.

From taking office in 1997, the Blair administrations had given no indication of interest in the historical objective of ROSLA, or of RPA, with the only related initiative being the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) as championed by Gordon Brown and Ed Balls. This was to mitigate the concern, dating back to at least Neil Kinnock's leadership, regarding the levels of young people who would leave school with no immediate training or employment and to improve the rates of pupils who chose to pursue further learning after their compulsory education came to an end. Furthermore, EMA was a measure that sought to specifically ameliorate the particularly acute impact of this transition in secondary education on working-class children, who often left education at the earliest opportunity in order to supplement the household income of their parents.

It is necessary then to establish the development and implementation of RPA, proposed by then Secretary of State for Education and Skills Alan Johnson, in the chronology of the Blair governments. It should also be noted that RPA age is differentiated from the traditional ROSLA. As set out in Johnson's policy document, *Raising Expectations: Staying in education and training post-16*,⁸⁸ RPA meant that there would be a statutory requirement for 16 and 17-year-olds to participate, through either education, training, or a combination of both, rather than an extension of formal schooling. The historical element of ROSLA and the implications of leaving compulsory education were both aspects Johnson raised when questioned about his appointment to the role of Education Secretary:

It was my idea to raise the education leaving age to eighteen 'cos it struck me as being ridiculous that whilst it was a recommendation from the Butler, cross-party coalition government in the war that it ought to be lifted not just from fourteen to fifteen but then from fifteen to sixteen, and then from sixteen to eighteen and the last bit of that, the second bit took thirty years, the last bit had never been done. I had seen it operate in Canada, I went out there on a visit, and came back and said look we've got to do this. It can't be the school leaving age because there are apprentices and there's all kinds of things, but it has to be the education leaving age and we have to change this mindset that you dispense with education when you're still effectively a child.⁸⁹

In further probing on the policy formation process and the practicalities of proposing a policy that had not been considered by the leadership of the government, Johnson recounted:

A trip to Canada. Sat down with the governor of Quebec I think it was, he was a very, very competent politician and a nice guy, and he was going through this at the time. He said, he told me the struggles they'd had, including introducing something that said you couldn't get a driving license unless you're still at school, 'cos you could drive there from the age of sixteen. They'd tried all that, and then come to the conclusion, what are we messing about at here, they're still kids until they're eighteen, they should be in education. He was taking it through, and it was working well, and when I came back I spoke to, you always have a representative

of Number Ten, mine was Conor Ryan by then, it had been Andrew Adonis of course originally, he was now a Minister with me. A Minister who was the first education minister brought up in care, and I was probably the first Secretary of State who'd been on free school meals. So, we made a reasonable pair.

Conor Ryan didn't take a lot of convincing but as always in those days, you had to deal with Number Ten and Number Eleven, the TB-GBs. Gordon was fine, I mean it was education for Christ sake, it was the Butler Act being enacted all that time after Butler. So, no I didn't meet a lot of opposition. It was all practical stuff, how are you going to do it, what're you going to do, drag them to school, what are the police going to patrol the streets looking for seventeen-year-olds that are not at school, they may not be adults at sixteen, but they bloody look like it, you know. I got a lot of the, well you left school at fifteen, in these meetings we held around the country. But by and large there was a consensus there.⁹⁰

The seeming absence of serious thought afforded to this policy proposal prior to Johnson's arrival suggests that the capacity of the government was occupied by other policy considerations. One suggestion is the long-term considerations of the 14 to 19 reform agenda consideration for the reform of the 14 to 19 age group. The potential reform of the latter half of secondary education has been a long-term consideration of the Labour Party both in opposition and in government. This can be demonstrated with publications by prominent authors at influential organisations such as David Miliband at IPPR, Sir Ron Dearing's review of the qualifications structure and David Blunkett's Opposition policy documents.⁹¹

Once in government, this potential for reform was a constant presence throughout Blair's premiership with each Education Secretary publishing at least one policy document on the subject: Morris' Green Paper *14 – 19: Extending Opportunities, Raising Standards*,⁹² Clarke's proposals published as *14 – 19: Opportunity and Excellence*,⁹³ and Ruth Kelly's White Paper *14 – 19: Education and Skills*.⁹⁴ All of which was further complemented by cross government publications and major reviews such as the Tomlinson Report. It is therefore a possibility that the Blair governments focus on reforms to the content and structure of the curriculum and

qualifications for this age group obscured a much simpler and historical objective. The result of this, as recounted by Johnson, was a blank page for this policy on his arrival at DfES:

No, I can't account for that. Why didn't anyone pick it up, unless it was, you know, too many other things to worry about and how are we going to enforce it and all that stuff. I mean everyone was obsessed with NEET [Not in education, employment or training] figures, and our big, you know in this country, I think in the OECD there was only Turkey and Greece that were below us for number of kids who, proportion of kids who left school at the first opportunity. We were in a bad state with that. I think the idea was to encourage them not to leave, not to force it. That's the only thing I can think of.⁹⁵

When pressed for further detail as to the preparations for the policy, or the possibility of rudimentary policy designs at the department before his arrival, Johnson added:

No, I don't remember any sort of strand of this that was already in place. I might be wrong about that, but I can't remember any strand of it. It was, go to Canada, have a chat, come back. I mean, I'd also been to America and a lot of ideas there from what was happening, amazing things happening in New York and the KIP schools, Knowledge is Power schools. So, you come back with all this stuff and you start to work it through. My special advisers went out to talk to different people across Whitehall and we knew it needed legislation. It's always good to have an education bill, most Ministers in the Cabinet want a bill and here is a great thing to actually put in it. And, because it didn't solve the issues in terms of the cultural issue, of kids wanting to get away from school, which might have been the reason why it hadn't been enacted, and that strikes me as quite sensible. You've got to deal with the culture, before we deal with the legislation. There was lots of effort going into that, but no it just seemed to be something I could pick up and run with and just wait for someone to try and tackle me down and no one did.⁹⁶

4.7 Conclusion

From 2001 onwards, Blair's strategic approach towards the improvement of secondary education in England can be characterised as a 'kitchen sink' strategy, utilising any means to improve the quality of education in the majority of the country's schools. This included geographical policies, such as the City Academies and the London Challenge, and broader measures such as the Specialist Schools initiative and the Raising of the Participation Age.

In 1994, the number of pupils gaining 5 A to C GCSEs passes was 52.6% of 5.16 million entries, when Blair became leader of the Labour Party in 1997 this stood at 54.4% of 5.35 million and by the time he left office in 2007 it had increased to 63.3% of 5.83 million. This represents an increase from 2.9 million A to C GCSE passes in 1997 to 3.7 million ten years later, an upward trend that was maintained throughout Blair's ten years in office. Although the improved performance of pupils in assessment has long been a controversial subject with accusations of grade inflation, the author's judgement would consider that this trajectory can be attributed to the cumulative impact of New Labour's education agenda under Blair.⁹⁷

Across Blair's decade as Prime Minister, the unfolding of his education agenda is a study in grief and loss. Those political actors who contributed arguably the most to reshaping the structure and culture of England's education system have a personal biography that share one common characteristic: childhood loss. Adonis, abandoned by his mother and subsequently placed in care by his father; Blunkett, the death of his father; and Johnson, abandoned by an abusive father and the death of his mother. Between the three of them, they pursued policies which had the most significant dividend for pupils: establishing academies, placing quality and standards at the heart of Labour's approach to education, and realising the Party's long-held commitment to raising the participation age to 18. However, there are recognisable limits to this biographical coincidence. Other senior advisors and political actors either did not experience personal trauma, or if they had it was not made public, nor if they had may it be linked to childhood.

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² Seldon, A. *Blair* (London: The Free Press, 2004) Pp. 464 – 467.

³ Ibid. p. 634.

⁴ Blunkett, D. *The Blunkett Tapes: My Life in the Bear Pit* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006) p.278.

⁵ Seldon, A. *Blair Unbound* (London: Pocket Books, 2008) Pp. 331 – 334.

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- ⁶ Ibid. p. 43.
- ⁷ Interview with Charles Clarke (Zoom, 29th March 2021) p. 8.
- ⁸ Interview with Conor Ryan (Zoom, 14th April 2021) p. 12.
- ⁹ Interview with Rt. Hon. David Miliband (Zoom, 12th May 2021) p. 8.
- ¹⁰ Interview with Baroness Morris (Zoom, 6th April 2021) p. 11.
- ¹¹ Blair, T. *Leader's Speech*, Labour Party Conference [Speech Transcript] (1st October 2002, Labour Party Conference, Blackpool).
- ¹² Blunkett, D. *Transforming Secondary Education* [Speech Transcript] (15th March 2000, Social Market Foundation, London).
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- ¹⁴ Department for Education and Skills, *Schools: Achieving Success*. Cm 5230 (London: The Stationery Office, 2001).
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- ¹⁶ Fenwick-Sehl, L. 'Lessons from Elsewhere? The Evolution of the Labour Academy Concept, 1997 – 2010', *Research in Comparative and International Education*, Vol. 8 (2), (2013). Pp. 176 – 192.
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- ²² Chitty, C. *New Labour and Secondary Education, 1994 – 2010* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) Pp. 123 – 124., and, Tomlinson, S. *Education in a post-welfare society*, 2nd edition (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2005) p. 221.
- ²³ National Audit Office, *The Academies Programme*, HC 254 (London: The Stationery Office, 2007) p. 7.
- ²⁴ Lawton, D. *Education and Labour Party Ideologies: 1900 – 2001 and Beyond* (London: Routledge, 2004), and, Chitty, C. *New Labour and Secondary Education, 1994 – 2010* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).
- ²⁵ Adonis, A. *Education, Education, Education: Reforming England's Schools* (London: Biteback, 2012) Pp. 29 – 33.
- ²⁶ Interview with Andrew Adonis (Phone conversation, 4th March 2021) p. 1.
- ²⁷ Interview with David Blunkett (Zoom, 31st March 2021) p. 1.
- ²⁸ Interview with Alan Johnson (Willerby, 11th March 2021) Pp. 3 – 5.
- ²⁹ Interview with Alan Johnson (Willerby, 11th March 2021) p. 3.
- ³⁰ National Audit Office, *Improving Poorly Performing Schools in England*, HC 679 (London: The Stationery Office, 2006) Pp. 44 – 45.
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- ³⁷ Ibid. p. 193.
- ³⁸ Ibid. Pp. 202 – 203.
- ³⁹ Ibid. p. 238.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 211.
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- ⁴⁴ Interview with David Miliband (Zoom, 12th May 2021) p. 3.
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Chapter 5

Brown 2007 – 2010: Innovation or Consolidation?

‘Usque conabor - I strive to the utmost’.

– Kirkcaldy High School motto

Following Tony Blair’s announcement in May 2007 of his intention to resign by the end of June, Gordon Brown was elected unopposed as leader of the Labour Party and subsequently replaced Blair as Prime Minister. During Brown’s three-year tenure as Prime Minister, his government would continue to pursue secondary education policies introduced in England between 1997 and 2007 to a significant extent with only minor alterations to policies. This is demonstrated in the further expansion of key initiatives such as the academies programme, and the quality and standards agenda. Brown and his sole Education Secretary, Ed Balls, repurposed earlier successful policies to continue to tackle educational underachievement, leading to initiatives such as the National Challenge programme. There was also limited but significant discontinuity, in both personnel and the machinery of government, while the domestic agenda of Brown’s government in relation to education shifted away from a narrow view of educational institutions as detached entities and instead emphasised a more holistic approach towards children’s development and the related services.

5.1 Political actors and machinery of government

Brown’s accession to the office of Prime Minister marked the most significant change of political actor in a decade and would have considerable consequences for secondary education and white working-class boys in England. Brown made two significant changes that would influence education policy throughout his premiership. Firstly, he would appoint Ed Balls to be Education Secretary. Secondly, he would reorganise the machinery of government to form a new Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) to replace the Department for Education and Skills.

Whilst Blair was Prime Minister, Brown demonstrated minimal interest in education with the exception of those elements that impacted the labour market. Brown’s elevation to the

highest office should not be overlooked as a major influencing factor in shaping his government's secondary education policy in this period. Brown's personal biography is in considerable contrast to Blair's, as the son of a Church of Scotland Minister, a Labour Party historian and member of the Trade Union Movement. The institutions which shaped him are qualitatively and materially different from those of Blair's hinterland and shaped his view of education.

Although Brown further contributed to the discontinuity and turnover of personnel at the education department across the period of 1997 to 2010, there was continuity across his premiership as Balls would be the only Secretary of State appointed to the DCFS. Across the transition from the third Blair government to Brown's administration, there was a significant degree of continuity in personnel. At the Minister of State level, Jim Knight as Schools Minister and Beverley Hughes as Children's Minister continued in office until Brown's June 2009 reshuffle. Most significantly, the architect of the academies programme, Andrew Adonis was also invited to remain in the education department under Brown, as set out in his own publication¹ and, in an interview with Seldon, claimed it was on the basis that Brown agreed to continue the academies programme, the excellence agenda and Teach First.²

The accounts within the literature concerning Brown's initial Cabinet formation and his appointment of Balls to the education brief give an indication of the indecisiveness of the principal political actor in government. According to Seldon's account, Balls' potential appointment as Chancellor became a victim of the political balancing act Brown believed was necessary to hold the Labour Party together. As Balls was involved with the machinery of government review during the transition period that had led to the proposal for the DCSF, it was resolved that Balls was in the best position to lead this new department. However, in the days prior to his appointment, Balls did not know which Cabinet position he would be appointed to.³ This was reiterated by Balls in his autobiography⁴ and in an interview with the author, with Balls attesting:

I think what we, we at the Treasury had been thinking about this department for the previous year, not really fundamentally me, others, Nick Pearce and Gavin Kelly and the Treasury teams. I didn't know, I supported this, I'd been very involved

in, particularly doing work around policy for disabled children and their families in two thousand and six, seven, but beyond that I wasn't involved in the detail of policy, and I didn't know I was going to do this job until two days before the reshuffle. So, I had no time to prepare.⁵

While Abbott surmises that the appointment of a senior Brown loyalist to the post demonstrated the significance of education to the new administration,⁶ Seldon has shown that this motivation was not the cause of the appointment. However, this mistaken belief illustrates how authors of other disciplines may misinterpret the decisions of political actors and underscores the important contribution political historians can make to the discourse on education.

Alan Johnson, the final Secretary of State for Education and Skills, was to be replaced by Ed Balls at the newly formed DCSF. However, this was not always going to be the case. At this juncture of Cabinet formation, in an interview with the author, Johnson recounted how during a meeting with Brown in his Commons office, the new Prime Minister had offered for him to retain his position as Education Secretary before informing him that the department's remit would be undergoing a substantial change:

That night, Gordon was doing his reshuffle and I had to go into the Commons, into his office at the Commons, at about nine o'clock. He said to me, Alan you did really well in the deputy leadership, and you're entitled to, if you want to, insist to stay where you are. Alright I thought, this is interesting. But, just to let you know I'm going to change the department. I'm going to move higher education out of it, I'm going to move further education out of it and I'm going to call it the Department Children, Schools and Families rather than the Department for Education. All three of those, I was against, but I thought what's the point of having a ruck, let's find out where I could go to. And Gordon in the next breath said my priority is going to be health, it's going to be my absolute priority to focus on health.⁷

In reconciling the timelines of the two political actors, it would seem that Brown offered Johnson the opportunity to continue in-post despite having offered the role to Balls earlier

that same week. The appointment of Balls could therefore be interpreted as one of both political pragmatism and convenience. Although Balls was a competent and intelligent administrator, there was an opportunity for Brown to restore a level of continuity in personnel to the education brief that had not been present since Blunkett had departed for the Home Office in 2001, with a similarly capable and senior political actor who had a long-term interest in education. Brown's somewhat disorganised approach to Cabinet formation demonstrates two factors that would influence his tenure as Prime Minister. First, his risk averse personality, demonstrated above by his Cabinet appointments, would permeate his policy choices as well. Second, Brown was aware of the political context he was operating in both within the Labour Party, and the ongoing tensions between the Blairite and Brownite factions, and more broadly of British politics, which included a resurgent Conservative Party under the leadership of David Cameron.

In terms of the machinery of government, one of the most significant decisions by Brown and his team was to rename and revise the remit of the DfES, creating the DCSF and the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS). Seldon outlines how preparations were underway prior to Brown's relocation to Downing Street, for the formation of a reconstituted education department with a broader remit.⁸ On examining the structure of Whitehall, Brown's transition team, led by Balls, developed plans for the creation of a children's department that held a broader remit of children's development and welfare, rather than the sole focus on education. This extended to sharing Ministerial portfolios, including apprenticeships with Business, youth justice with the Ministry of Justice, children's health with the Department of Health, and youth sport with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

There is disagreement within the literature over the significance of the renaming of the department and the widening of its remit. Authors such as Adams argue that this was a radical decision that reflected the broader portfolio of the brief as a children's services department.⁹ In contrast, the opposing view is presented by Balls in an interview with Abbott, who contends that this was evolution rather than a revolution, pointing to several domestic policy measures, legislation and initiatives implemented by Johnson and his predecessors that addressed the issues of children's wellbeing and care.¹⁰ This does not quite corroborate Brown's own view, expressed in his autobiography, that the creation of the department was an innovation which

would facilitate co-operation between children's services and schools.¹¹ Notably, other prominent political actors from the same period believe the renaming to be a mistake, with Johnson commenting:

The other thing I don't like about that was they changed the name of the department, you know, children, schools and families, it's education. You might dress it up with little rainbows and say it's all about cuddly little things like schools and families, but it's not, it's about education. I think one of the things Cameron did right was to change it straight back again.¹²

Similarly, while Adonis notes Balls appointment as a positive move as it maintains a level of continuity, he concurs with Johnson's assessment of the machinery of government reforms: "Ed Balls stays, there is stability. I was against renaming the department, it deprioritized schools in renaming DfES to DCSF."¹³

This notable contrast in views between Balls and his former colleagues speaks to the view of education held by the respective Prime Ministers under which they served. Blair held a harder view of education that sought to prioritise quality and standards regardless of the structure of the secondary education system, and adopted a pragmatic approach to policy interventions to achieve improvements in attainment. The removal of education from the departmental title can be interpreted as a diminution of status in the office. As argued by Barber, and later enacted by Blair, if education is to be considered the leading policy priority of the government, then the DfE must be considered a Great Office of State. The removal of education from the department's name, broadening its remit and placing it alongside children and families can therefore be read as a loss of status.

This contrasts with Brown's view of education, which is influenced by his personal biography and the formative experience of secondary schooling in Scotland's education system. After being placed on a fast-track education programme which meant he progressed from primary school one year early to begin his secondary career. In his autobiography, Brown describes the strain and pressure he and his peers experienced and recalls an earlier article he wrote about the experience, in which he describes it as a "totally ludicrous experiment".¹⁴ This is instructive

of Brown's thought and ideas on education and how he would later come to view the reforms to the English secondary school system.

In the author's judgement it was the reorientation of the broader education policy agenda towards children's welfare that was radical. Although Balls is correct to say this was the direction of travel of policy prior to his appointment, the overriding occupation of the education department was the administration of England's schooling system, from pre-school to tertiary education. Therefore, the elevation of families, children's services and welfare issues led to a fundamental shift in the policy priorities and focus of the department. This was also formalised through shared responsibility for some areas with other departments and joint Ministerial portfolios with other departments. Although schools and standards were still an important policy area, they were not afforded the same attention they had received since 1997. The Brown administration would have similarly been forced to reprioritise policy due to the finite resources of a Whitehall department. The implementation of multiple high profile competing policy agendas, driven by Ministers, cannot be sustained indefinitely. The promotion of issues such as child poverty and health, necessitates a shift in Whitehall personnel and the programmes of work they are allocated to, departmental expenditure, political capital, and the building of support for the government's policy agenda.

The other radical aspect to this Whitehall reorganisation was the outright removal of adult, further and higher education from the education brief and its allocation to the newly created DIUS with its own Secretary of State. The impact of this decision should not be underestimated as it carried both financial and political implications for the Brown government. Firstly, although Balls acknowledges the loss of adult, further and higher education, he views it as a worthwhile trade off that, despite the department's loss of financial power, it gained broader influence over policy areas that impacted children across government and Whitehall.¹⁵ The reorganisation of the DfES speaks to the managerialism thesis of New Labour's time in office. A common issue explored in business management literature is the need for separate sections of an organisation to shift from a siloed to a cross-cutting approach. The former is said to inhibit communication, cooperation, and lead to poorer outcomes due to the isolation of sections of the organisation. The latter in theory should facilitate greater problem solving and

improved outcomes. This approach characterises Brown and Balls approach, seeking to pursue a cross-government agenda on behalf of children.

Secondly, this was a loss of status and prestige amongst the Whitehall order. Removing adult, further and higher education meant a significant loss of financial power for the new children's department and that the education department would no longer have control over the full educational career of children, young adults and beyond. As political actors often act as interested parties, adopting a stance of departmentalism, in their attempt to safeguard the finances and responsibilities of their respective portfolios. It must be contemplated that had Balls known his eventual destination prior to Brown becoming Prime Minister, the Brown government's plans for Whitehall and the DCSF may have looked considerably different. Nor could Balls have foreseen that by removing these responsibilities from the education department, it would take almost a decade for them to be returned, with Theresa May bringing education policy and portfolio holders under one roof in 2016.¹⁶

5.2 Ideas & rhetoric

In taking office as Prime Minister, Gordon Brown would lead a shift in the ideational traditions and rhetoric that would guide his government. While Brown's political thought only differs from Blair's to a limited extent, there are aspects which were substantively different, including their conceptions of equality. These differences extended to the rhetoric utilised by Brown throughout his speeches, especially those concerning education. In setting out his vision for education, Brown was much more explicit in linking his government's policy to the ideas at the centre of the Labour's Party ideational traditions.

Firstly, it is important to recognise that as co-architects of New Labour, the idea that significant ideational differences existed between Blair and Brown's during their time in government cannot be seriously disputed.¹⁷ However, there are elements of Brown's thinking that can be considered an ideational shift, specifically in relation to his conception of equality. As set out by Beech and Hickson, Brown's conception of equality is composed of two parts: a generous sufficiency version of equality and a non-strict prioritarianism interpretation of equality. In short, the former refers to improving the circumstances of people by providing a sufficient

level of income and public services. The latter is to give financial priority to the most deprived members of the public, with priority reducing as the position of this group improves.¹⁸

Secondly, a shift takes place in the rhetoric utilised by Brown to communicate his government's policy stances. Brown would make significant and overt references to principles and values that hold an important place in the ideational traditions of the Labour Party. While these references were a rhetorical device, they also served to demonstrate the ideational shift that underpinned Brown's education policies. A particularly pertinent example of this can be found in Brown's first speech on education as Prime Minister:

On its own, equality of opportunity can never be enough. Opportunities are only meaningful if people have the capabilities, the resources, the aspirations to make the most of them. So inequalities in aspiration and in the capability to benefit from them must be tackled also. Without doing that fairer outcomes, the fairness which will shape the opportunities of the generations to come will not be achieved. But if we can expand opportunity, aspiration and participation together, then outcomes for pupils, parents and citizens will be fairer, the result of the choices we make, the hard work and effort we put in – not imposed by the accident of birth or the brute luck of circumstances.¹⁹

In this passage, Brown is utilising rhetoric to establish his own conception of equality and its position in the revisionist social democratic tradition of the Labour Party before later setting out what this means for schools. This can also be interpreted as an attempt by Brown to put clear *red* water between himself and Blair.

5.3 Innovators or Consolidators?

In the three years of the Brown government, Brown and his Education Secretary Balls continued to implement fundamental elements of the New Labour policy agenda in secondary education in England. The major policies enacted by his predecessor included structural change to England's secondary school system with the establishment of academies, and the quality and standards agenda. The discontinuities in secondary education policy consisted of minor alterations to bring them into line with the thinking of the Brown administrations. This

included encouraging schools to work more closely together, co-operation rather than competition, and the emphasis on children's wellbeing, as noted by Balls in an interview with the author:

The truth is in education policy terms, there's a lot of continuity, is the reality. I mean, I strongly embraced the partnership. I supported strongly the testing regime, made a small change at key stage three. We, sort of, continued to challenge as well as support the teaching profession. ... A big change was focusing on local authorities and their responsibilities in terms of leadership and educational change, but that was mainly continuity. The change was happening, kind of, more widely in terms of whether schools were taking their wider responsibilities to each other seriously enough and whether other agencies were working with schools enough. That was where a lot of the change happened.²⁰

5.4 Academies

Prior to Brown's arrival in Downing Street, the future of the academies programme, the flagship policy of Blair's second and third terms in office, seemed uncertain. The then Chancellor had never visited an academy school, nor commented on their position as the flagship education policy. However, in March 2007, Brown began to change his political position. First, at a government event held at an academy, Brown offered his unqualified support to the landmark schools policy.²¹ Second, following Blair's announcement of a target of 400 academies in November 2006,²² Brown acquiesced to this objective during the 2007 Labour Party leadership contest as chronicled by both the press²³ and contemporaneous accounts by political actors.²⁴ Third, in Brown's final Mansion House speech as Chancellor, he endorsed Blair's choice and diversity agenda, remarking: "In order to achieve excellence in the classroom, future educational policy must and will champion greater diversity."²⁵ This could be interpreted as a strategic political move by Brown with twin intentions: first, to prepare the Parliamentary Labour Party for his leadership by committing to the continuation of a key policy it confirms Blair's legacy in secondary education; and second, in response to the Conservative Party's vocal support for the academies programme under the leadership of David Cameron and David Willetts as shadow education secretary.

During Brown's time as Prime Minister the place of the academies programme as a major legacy of the New Labour agenda in secondary education in England was confirmed. The academies programme was a significant element of continuity in secondary education policy in England, with revisions to the policy made during this period that aligned with the thinking of the preeminent political actors. Balls succinctly summarises the Brown government's approach to the academies programme: "I signed off more academies than any other Secretary of State, but we put them, I think, in a broader context, changed academies policy some."²⁶ The revisions included first removing the requirement for new sponsors to contribute £2 million in funding to establish a new academy. This was initially only for other educational institutions, including universities, colleges, and schools, before being extended to private and third sector organisations in 2009. The second major revision was to allow local authorities to act as co-sponsors, a provocative move given the impetus behind the academies programme was partly to bypass the conservatism of local education authorities.²⁷ In an interview with the author, Balls explained:

I think what had happened with the academies movement, it had been a bit random. Some local authorities engaged with it, some didn't, most academies were being set up in schools which were underperforming but that wasn't always the ethos. There was a, sort of, rather narrow complicated entry requirements and it was like the only game in town in terms of structural change. Often, they were quite expensive. ... We took away the entry requirement for academies, we took away the amount of money a sponsor had to provide, we broadened it so suddenly universities, further education colleges, schools, Outwood Grange in Yorkshire was for the first time allowed to sponsor other academies.²⁸

This typifies the shift in ideas and rhetoric in the Brown government's approach to secondary education policy. In order to have each child fulfil their potential, academies as the government's flagship school improvement programme had to be broadened so as to be accessible to all children. This expansion of the programme simultaneously recognised that pockets of deprivation exist within more affluent areas.

The literature assessing the performance of academies continued to demonstrate a positive impact on secondary schools in England. The NAO produced a robust evaluation, published shortly after Brown had left government in 2010, assessing the GCSE performance of 62 academies compared to similar local authority maintained schools. A key distinction in the NAO analysis was the matching of academy schools with five similar schools, in addition to utilising two factors that are influential in school performance: deprivation, measured by proportion of FSM pupils and the prior attainment of pupils, as measured by examination results in their final year of primary school. It also included a separate analysis of those pupils registered as eligible for free school meals. The NAO's findings demonstrate that academies continued to outperform their predecessor schools, overall academies were improving the proportions of pupils attaining five A*-C GCSE grades or equivalent at a faster rate than maintained schools with similar intakes.²⁹ The performance of the free school meals (FSM) cohort, a demographic which is likely to include white working-class boys, did improve, albeit the attainment gap between FSM pupils and their wealthier peers had increased in academies compared with equivalent schools. The NAO suggested that their findings showed that disadvantaged cohorts benefitted more immediately from the higher standards at an academy.³⁰

5.5 National Challenge

The Brown government confirmed its commitment to continuing the New Labour agenda in secondary education policy in England by prioritising the raising of quality and standards in schools. The flagship policy of the Brown administration's secondary improvement strategy which contributed most significantly to the standards agenda was the National Challenge (NC). The NC policy also contributed to the objectives agreed between the DCSF and the Treasury's Public Service Agreement (PSA) Delivery Agreements 10 and 11.^a

The NC sought to challenge LEAs to improve academic attainment in secondary schools by setting a minimum performance target. The measure Brown and Balls utilised for the NC target was for secondary schools to have a minimum of 30% of pupils achieve five or more A*

^a PSA Delivery Agreement 10 was to "Raise the educational achievement of all young people" while PSA 11 was "Narrow the gap in educational achievement between children from low income and disadvantaged backgrounds and their peers".

to C GCSE grades or equivalent, including maths and English GCSE, by 2011. The policy was trailed in Brown's first speech on education as Prime Minister in October 2007. Speaking at the University of Greenwich, Brown set out the case for the NC:

Every child is entitled to a decent school and a good education. So we must also put an end to failure. We have cut the number of failing schools dramatically in the last decade. In 1997 over 600 secondary schools had less than 25% of children getting 5 or more good GCSEs. Now instead of over 600, 26 do. But the latest figures still show that there are 670 schools where less than 30% of pupils get 5 A star to C grades at GCSE, including English and maths, and while that is down from 1,600 in 1997 there is still much to do.³¹

Balls later provided the details of the policy in an interview with the Guardian in February 2008³² before it was formally announced, with £400 million of funding and identifying 638 schools which fell below the performance indicator, in June of the same year.³³ If a school was unable to achieve the target, they would be encouraged to become an academy, trust school or to merge with a more successful partner school. In response to a question about the impetus behind the NC and how successful it was in improving educational outcomes for disadvantaged children, Balls commented:

I think if you take the numbers of schools which had less than thirty percent of kids at sixteen getting five A to C GCSEs including English and maths, there had been a marked fall in the number of such schools from ninety-seven to two thousand and seven. I haven't got the exact numbers to hand but, sort of, from the fifteen hundred to three hundred in secondary schools, that kind of, but there were still too many ... So, what we said with National Challenge, and a consequence of that was there were some areas which had disproportionate numbers of these schools not doing as well, and National Challenge was the first time, we took the London Challenge model and went national, and it was, sort of, uncompromising in the sense that we said to the local area you've got to come up with a plan.³⁴

The two outstanding influences on the NC policy were David Blunkett's original GCSE floor target and the London Challenge (LC) policy. In Labour's first term, Blunkett sought to improve GCSE attainment by introducing a performance target. This was known as a floor standard with which Blunkett challenged all secondary schools to have 25% of pupils achieve 5 A* to C grades GCSEs by 2006. Later, in 2006, the measure was broadened by Ruth Kelly to include maths and English GCSEs, as she recalled:

So, I reformed GCSE league tables to include English and Maths which was another significant development ... I did say that you couldn't get a maths GCSE or an English GCSE without first having passed the functional element of the Maths or the English GCSE. Speaks skills for life really. But also recognising that employment success was highly tied to having GCSE English and Maths at a good pass.³⁵

Second, the NC would seek to emulate the success of the LC policy by emulating key aspects of the programme. This included for instance National Challenge Advisers, who were allocated to each NC school to support them with their expertise and were involved in making arrangements for further support for every school. This role was analogous to the Challenge Advisers who held a significant position in the LC.

There is limited material assessing the success of the NC programme. However, the Department for Education did conduct a brief internal assessment as part of a broader review of the National Strategies programme. This was published in 2011 after Brown and Balls had left office. Two measures provide the clearest indication of the programme's success. Firstly, the decrease in the number of schools which were below the performance target, which at the point Labour left government had fallen from 631 in 2007 to 81 in 2010. Secondly, the improvement in the percentage achieving 5+ A* – C including English and mathematics for schools supported by the NC, with the intervention resulting in a 6.6% increase between 2008 and 2010.³⁶

However, this positive assessment of the programme is challenged by Bolton in a House of Commons Library briefing. Utilising a quantitative approach, Bolton argues that when contributing factors are accounted for, the NC is less successful than would first appear. Firstly,

Bolton notes that the statistics do not accurately represent the turnover in schools who fall below the 30% target in the net change figures. This can be attributed to the fluid nature of a key performance measure based on pupil attainment. As some schools' results improve and move above the 30% benchmark, others decline due to the variation between cohorts, while a number of schools close altogether. Second, Bolton highlights variation at local authority level, with five local authorities having a quarter of their schools below the threshold. This point is complemented by comparing the percent of pupils in secondary schools in England below the target in 2009, with 7.4% of pupils attending such schools nationally, while this contrasts with Kingston-Upon-Hull having the highest at 37%. Third, on analysing the distribution of results of NC schools in the 2008/09 academic year, Bolton finds more than 50% of schools to be in the 25-29% range. Bolton points to the unpredictability of pupil attainment, even when a school is improving over time, that performance each year is not even. A further contributing factor highlighted by Bolton is the composition of pupil body at NC schools. He notes that the rate of Special Educational Need pupils was 20% nationally compared to 35% for NC schools. Similarly, the proportion of pupils eligible for FSMs nationally was 13%, while NC schools it was more than double at 28%. However, Bolton does recognise the complex relationship between such factors and attainment, citing other schools with a similar make up of pupils who meet the target.³⁷

In assessing the NC programme, the Brown government made a significant contribution to the continuing improvement of secondary education for white working-class boys in England. Brown and his Education Secretary Balls should be commended for setting a challenging target to raise the attainment of pupils. In comparison, when setting the original floor target in 2000, Blunkett aimed to achieve 25% of pupils achieving 5 GCSEs at A*-C grades in six years. In contrast, Balls aimed to achieve the 30% target in three years, which given the policy was launched in June 2008 was implemented across two full academic years. In conjunction with Balls having limited experience of the education brief before being appointed by Brown.

However, despite the achievements of the NC policy, the evidence suggests that the majority of schools who participated in the programme were close to the 30% target prior to the start of the policy. These schools therefore represented relatively low hanging fruit for Brown and Balls that was quickly achieved. This is illustrated most clearly in the first 12 months of the NC

programme. Between 2007/08 and 2008/09, there was a sharp reduction in the number of schools failing to meet the target from 631 to 439. Furthermore, as noted above by Bolton, in 2008/09 over 50% of schools fell in the 25-29% range of results. This indicates that many schools needed one more heave of government challenge and support to achieve the target. Although Bolton makes a valid point regarding the hidden net change in the number of schools below the 30% target, this point is more about transparency of the process rather than performance. Schools are not static institutions by their nature with new cohorts of pupils entering and leaving with each cycle of the academic year, thus an element of upwards mobility amongst some schools and decline for others within these figures should be expected. There is compelling evidence to suggest that there is a core of schools within a small cohort of local authorities that were particularly stubborn cases that were resistant to the school improvement strategies of the Brown government. In Bolton's note, this is most clearly illustrated by the case of Kingston-Upon-Hull. However, it should be noted that, although a quarter of the city's schools were below the floor target of 30%, this was a reduction from half the city's schools at the beginning of the NC programme.

5.6 Conclusion

Prior to Brown becoming Prime Minister, Blair's legacy in secondary education in England was undecided. However, Brown's appointment as Prime Minister would confirm Blair's legacy as he adopted the two fundamental strands of New Labour's educational agenda: the academies programme and the quality and standards agenda. This decision alone meant that the impact of the Brown government's secondary education policy on white working-class boys in England would be positive. This was achieved by continuing structural reforms to the secondary school system, thereby facilitating the improvements to educational attainment that the academy model was providing. The impact on white working-class boys was further amplified by Balls adopting the quality and standards agenda. In secondary education, this led the Brown government to challenge the lowest performing schools and resulted in substantive improvements in attainment at GCSE. Both policies would consolidate New Labour's agenda in secondary education.

On taking office, Brown and Balls enacted a radical decision to reorganise and rename the DfES. However, this was the only transformative element of the Brown government's agenda

in education. Although these policy themes were already present in the period 1997 to 2007, especially around children's wellbeing, the changes to the machinery of government formalised this approach for the first time. This contrasts with Brown's wider failure to develop a radical and transformative policy agenda in secondary education that was on par with the initiatives introduced by Blair.

The discourse considering education policy during Brown's administration suffers from a critical paucity of sources within the literature. Those academics who do evaluate Brown's premiership often focus on the more significant policies and events during the three-year period, such as economic policy and the global financial crisis, or as part of a broad-brush approach to domestic policy.

¹ Adonis, A. *Education, education, education: Reforming England's Schools* (London: Biteback Publishing, 2012) Pp. 116 – 117.

² Seldon, A. *Brown at 10* (London: Biteback Publishing, 2010) p. 8.

³ Ibid. Pp. 6 – 7.

⁴ Balls, E. *Speaking Out: Lessons in Life and Politics* (London: Hutchinson, 2016) Pp. 209 – 211.

⁵ Interview with Ed Balls (Zoom, 28th April 2021) p. 5.

⁶ Abbott, I., Rathbone, M., & Whitehead, P. *Education Policy* (London: Sage Publications, 2013) p. 165.

⁷ Interview with Alan Johnson (Willerby, 11th March 2021) p. 15.

⁸ Seldon, A. *Brown at 10* (London: Biteback Publishing, 2010).

⁹ Adams, P. *Policy and Education* (London: Routledge, 2014) p. 55.

¹⁰ Abbott, I., Rathbone, M., & Whitehead, P. *Education Policy* (London: Sage Publications, 2013) Pp. 172 – 173.

¹¹ Brown, G. *My Life, Our Times* (London: Vintage, 2018) p. 233.

¹² Interview with Alan Johnson (Willerby, 11th March 2021) p. 6.

¹³ Interview with Andrew Adonis (Phone conversation, 4th March 2021) p. 1.

¹⁴ Brown, G. *My Life, Our Times* (London: Vintage, 2018) Pp. 42 – 43.

¹⁵ Abbott, I., Rathbone, M., & Whitehead, P. *Education Policy* (London: Sage Publications, 2013) p. 172.

¹⁶ May, T. *Machinery of Government Changes* (HC Deb 18 July 2016, HC20WS) Available online: <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2016-07-18/HCWS94>. [Accessed 05 July 2023].

¹⁷ Griffiths, S. 'The public services under Gordon Brown – similar reforms, less money', in Beech, M. & Lee, S. (eds.) *The Brown Government: A Policy Evaluation* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010) Pp. 52 – 54.

¹⁸ Beech, M. & Hickson, K. *Labour's Thinkers: The Intellectual Roots of Labour from Tawney to Gordon Brown* (London: Tauris, 2007) Pp. 265 – 280.

¹⁹ Brown, G. Speech on Education [Speech transcript] (31 October 2007) Available online: <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20080908231822/http://www.number10.gov.uk/Page13675> [Accessed 15/05/2023].

²⁰ Interview with Ed Balls (Zoom, 28th April 2021) p. 5.

²¹ P. Wintour, 'Brown backs city academies with words and cash', *The Guardian*, Internet edition. 20 March 2007. Available online: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2007/mar/20/uk.schools> [Accessed 08/05/2023].

²² Blair, T. Speech at Specialist Schools and Academies Trust Conference [Speech transcript] (30 November 2006) Available online: <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20070701143240/http://www.pm.gov.uk/output/Page10514.asp> [Accessed 05/05/2023].

²³ BBC, 'Brown pledges academy support', *BBC News*, 15 May 2007. Available online: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/6657173.stm> [Accessed 05/05/2023].

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- ²⁴ Adonis, A. *Education, education, education: Reforming England's Schools* (London: Biteback Publishing, 2012) Pp. 114 – 115.
- ²⁵ Brown, G. Speech to Mansion House [Speech transcript] (20 June 2007) Available online: https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20070701080519/http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/newsroom_and_speeches/press/2007/press_68_07.cfm [Accessed 15/05/2023].
- ²⁶ Interview with Ed Balls (Zoom, 28th April 2021) p. 5.
- ²⁷ Griffiths, S. 'The public services under Gordon Brown – similar reforms, less money', in Beech, M. & Lee, S. (eds.) *The Brown Government: A Policy Evaluation* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010) Pp. 60 – 61.
- ²⁸ Interview with Ed Balls (Zoom, 28th April 2021) Pp. 8 – 9.
- ²⁹ National Audit Office, *The Academies Programme*, HC 288 (London: The Stationery Office, 2010) Pp. 17 – 19.
- ³⁰ Ibid. Pp. 27 – 28.
- ³¹ Brown, G. Speech on Education [Speech transcript] (31 October 2007) Available online: <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20080908231822/http://www.number10.gov.uk/Page13675> [Accessed 15/05/2023].
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- ³³ Department for Children, Schools and Families, 'National Challenge Strategy Launched to Ensure More Children Get Better GCSEs', 10 June 2008. Available online: https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20080620125625/http://www.dfes.gov.uk/pns/DisplayPN.cgi?pn_id=2008_0109 [Accessed 19/05/2023].
- ³⁴ Interview with Ed Balls (Zoom, 28th April 2021) p. 8.
- ³⁵ Interview with Ruth Kelly (Zoom, 4th May 2021) p.4.
- ³⁶ Department for Education, *The National Strategies 1997 – 2011: A brief summary of the impact and effectiveness of the National Strategies* (London: Department for Education, 2011) Pp. 22 – 23.
- ³⁷ Bolton, P. *National Challenge Schools: Statistics*, Standard note SN/SG/5062, (London: House of Commons Library, 2010). Available online: <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/id/eprint/22801/1/SN05062.pdf> [Accessed 27/05/2023].

Chapter 6

Attitudes towards culture

'I said to this lad, "what are you doing?", and he said, "oh I ain't got no culture sir, I come from round here."'

Alan Johnson¹

The purpose of this thesis, up until this point, has been to provide an analytical narrative of the political history of secondary education policy in England under the Blair and Brown governments. To understand their purpose and mission, the original research question is seeking to answer the extent to which the attainment of white working-class boys benefitted from the rising tide, lifting all boats or not. In order to draw robust conclusions, the prior chapters of this thesis are the necessary foundations of the evaluation, underpinning its findings by ascertaining New Labour's education philosophy, policies, and the debates amongst elite political actors. This is complemented by the mapping and measuring of the aims, policies and approaches towards attainment and performance at secondary level in England. This chapter seeks to provide a specific understanding of the attainment of White British working-class boys during the period Blair and Brown were in power, utilising primary and secondary sources, including quantitative data collated by central government and qualitative data in the form of semi-structured interview material from elite political actors.

6.1 Culture

For the purposes of this thesis, culture will be defined broadly. This definition will be informed by a range of socio-economic indicators that can influence the home environment experienced by school pupils. These include: the population size of the local authority area, the composition of the family, housing and dwelling status, level of deprivation, unemployment data disaggregated by sex, and educational attainment data. This will be complemented by considering the character and heritage of the local authority area, attitudes towards culture, government policy and material from interviews with political actors.

6.2 Who are the working-class?

Before utilising quantitative data to analyse the impact of the Blair and Brown administrations on the educational attainment of white working-class boys in England, it is first necessary to outline and provide a definition for each aspect of this terminology, some elements of which are disputed.

The terminology of 'working-class' is highly contested in discourse on education and attainment. This stems from the fact that there is no precise or widely agreed definition, although there is a broader view that it is commonly used as a proxy for socio-economic status and at the least some form of disadvantage or deprivation. Debates on the subject are further exacerbated by the absence of a consensus view on the most appropriate definition of the term. The most common, albeit highly criticised,² is pupil eligibility for Free School Meals (FSM). This is the method this chapter will adopt to map and measure the educational attainment of White British working-class boys. The term FSM will also be used interchangeably with working-class and disadvantaged. In the period 1997 to 2010, eligibility for FSMs was conditional on a parent being in receipt of at least one of the following welfare benefits: Income Support; Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance; support under Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999; and Child Tax Credit. The list of qualifying state benefits was broadened on several occasions during Labour's time in office. First in April 2005, to include the Guarantee element of State Pension Credit,³ and later to include income-related Employment and Support Allowance and Working Tax Credit in specific circumstances.⁴

However, interpreting disadvantage through FSM eligibility is the subject of significant criticism. The most common critique is of its binary interpretation of disadvantage, as it divides pupils into eligible or ineligible and therefore either disadvantaged or not respectively. Those critical of FSM as a metric argue that it is a narrow and limited measure due to its inability to capture the complex nature of poverty and disadvantage which impacts pupils.⁵ As a measure of disadvantage, it excludes pupils whose families are in poorly paid occupations but earn enough to be above the financial benchmark to qualify for state welfare. Similarly, FSM eligibility does not account for the fluctuating nature of disadvantage, as pupils may be eligible for non-consecutive periods at different points throughout their scholastic career. There are also alternative, more complex, metrics collated by government during the period

that offer more nuanced statistical data, such as ACORN, a geo-demographic classification, and Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI). However, these measures are only useful to a limited extent as they do not offer the longevity and consistency that is provided by FSM eligibility data for historical analysis.

Despite these criticisms, FSM eligibility will be utilised to measure the achievements of White working-class boys in this chapter. The advantages to utilising this historical data set is that it is a long running series collated and published by the DfES and DCSF during the Blair and Brown administrations. The data therefore covers a majority of their time in government. Although it is a less sophisticated measure, it does guarantee that those present in the data can be considered to be disadvantaged. The utility of FSM data can be enhanced once it is supported by a combination of other variables that will be utilised to provide a more robust statistical analysis as a key method to answer the study's research question. Firstly, the education data recording GCSE attainment is disaggregated by both FSM eligibility and by sex. This accounts for two of the three most pertinent pupil characteristics for understanding the impact of secondary education and attainment policies on working-class boys. Secondly, this data is also broken down by local authority allowing for a more granular analysis by locality in England.

6.3 Gender and ethnicity: White British boys

In terms of ethnic group and gender, the primary subject of the research question is White British boys. This ethnic group is the overwhelming majority in England and is a descriptor that was utilised by the DfES, DCSF, the national census and the Office for National Statistics (ONS). In the 2001 national census, England was 86.99% White British, while White British pupils in schools in England accounted for 83.16% of all pupils. In the following census in 2011, these figures had decreased slightly to 80% and 79% respectively.

The demographic group of boys was selected as the sex of secondary school pupils is significant for two reasons: firstly, boys comprise the majority of pupils, and second; there is an existing achievement gap between the sexes. Boys are found to be the overall majority in each academic year by annual published government data. Similarly, birth sex ratios show that there have been consistently around 105 males born for every 100 females since 1980.⁶

Furthermore, secondary school attainment data demonstrates that, across all pupil characteristics, there is a gender attainment gap in which girls persistently outperform boys. In terms of White British disadvantaged girls, a consistently greater proportion of the cohort achieve the 5+ GCSEs A* - C benchmark, and including English and Mathematics, between 2001/02 and 2009/10 than their male peers. Per academic year, this varied from a low of 7% to a high of 9% for the benchmark, and around 5% higher when including the latter subjects.

Therefore, within the pupil characteristics data collated by government between the years 1997 and 2010, White British FSM-eligible boys are a significant and large disadvantaged ethnic group who perform consistently poorly. In any given academic year between 2001/02 and 2009/10, a cohort of between 24 to 27 thousand White British boys eligible for FSM sat their GCSEs. This equates to over three hundred thousand pupils over the 13-year period of New Labour government.

This is not a comparative study of secondary education attainment and ethnicity or one which seeks to utilise demographics and statistics to raise grievances against policies initiatives that may or may not have benefitted other ethnicities. This study aims to investigate and understand, using semi-structured interviews with elite political actors and quantitative data from the period, the impact of 13 years of Labour government secondary education and attainment policy on the achievements of white working-class boys.

Despite this debate over the exact definition of White British working-class boys, authors cannot deny the compelling evidence that pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds continue to achieve less than their wealthier peers.⁷ While other ethnic groups certainly face issues within secondary education, White British working-class pupils face acute challenges in achieving higher attainment in academic settings.

6.4 Local authorities

Together, these different datasets will facilitate a case study of the five local authority areas outside of London where White British working-class boys performed lowest in achieving 5+ A* - C GCSE grades, including in English and Mathematics.

Before conducting analysis of the data, it is necessary to establish why a multivariate analysis of these provincial areas is favourable to one focusing on disadvantaged boys within the capital or other large urban areas within England. Firstly, five local authorities outside of London and other large urban conurbations were selected as these areas have received greater coverage in both British political history and education literature. This is the case for both academic and official publications, which have chronicled the history of schools in London, from the lowest performing in GCSE attainment in England from 1997 to amongst the highest performing state schools by 2010, and larger cities' schools. Other publications have evaluated the performance of specific geographical school improvement policies such as the London Challenge and City Challenge. Both of these elements with reference to London are covered in earlier chapters of this thesis.

Secondly, local authorities in London were not amongst the worst performing for FSM eligible boys for the GCSE attainment benchmark. From the earliest academic year that data is available, 2001/02, for the performance of FSM eligible boys in attainment of 5+ GCSE grades A* - C, no London local authority is amongst the 10 lowest performing for GCSE attainment by FSM eligible boys. Although in 1997 London's schools were the worst performing in England more generally for boys achieving 5+ GCSEs A*-C. It must also be acknowledged that, given the inception of the data in 2001/02, the rising tide of the first Blair government's educational policies may have already lifted London's FSM boys from the bottom of the performance tables.

Third, the ethnic group demographics of local authorities outside of London are much more likely to have an almost wholly White British population. In comparison, the demographics of England's capital and other significant urban conurbations include a greater population of ethnic minorities. Thereby diluting any possible insights which could be drawn from analysis of White British pupils who are educated in these areas. The advantage of the former is to attempt to isolate White British boys eligible for FSM, by reducing the potential influence of cultural and social practices from other ethnicities. An interesting finding in the field of American secondary education is the academic attainment of ethnic minority pupils in secondary education tends to be higher than, and can have an influencing effect on, pupils of other ethnicity in the same institution. Therefore, it is necessary to identify mono-cultural

areas so as to facilitate analysis of White British boys and ensure that robust conclusions can be reasonably drawn from the data.

Fourth, to ensure greater validity, the local authorities to be included in this chapter as case studies have been subject to a selection process that utilises a set of criteria. The criteria include the three most significant factors: attainment, cohort size and ethnic group. The first element of this is that they fall within the ten lowest performing local authorities as measured by the national GCSE attainment by pupil characteristics in England data for the 2001/02 academic year and specifically the percentage of FSM eligible boys achieving 5+ GCSE grades at A* to C. This is the earliest date from which the data is available. Subsequent publications of this data will then be utilised to map and measure the performance of these local authorities until the end of the 2009/10 academic year, at which point New Labour left office. Crucially, this data provides GCSE attainment which is disaggregated by both FSM eligibility and sex per local authority. However, GCSE attainment by ethnic group is not made available at the local authority level. Therefore, the second element of the criteria will be that local authorities must have an ethnic group demography of at least 95% of citizens covered by the 2001 national census were categorised as White British. As GCSE attainment data by ethnic group is not available at the local authority level, the data drawn from the 2001 census will be used as a proxy to assure a high level of White British ethnic group within each local authority area. Although some may criticise this as being a considerably high level of White British respondents, higher than the national average of England's White British population at 86.99%, this measure provides a reasonable level of assurance that these areas are monocultural. Third, the size of the cohort must be statistically significant. This has been set at least 250 FSM eligible male pupils, equivalent to approximately 8 full classes of an average size of 30 pupils.

Local authority areas that were in the 10 lowest performing but have been excluded as part of the selection process following the application of the criteria: are either statistically insignificant, as they contain too few pupils, or did not meet the White British ethnic group quota. In the first instance, the two lowest performing local authorities in the 2001/02 academic year were Wokingham and Reading, where only 3.6% and 6.6% of FSM eligible boys achieved 5+ GCSE grades A* - C. However, these cohorts were comprised of only 55 and 61

pupils respectively, equivalent to two full classes, and were therefore excluded. Similarly, neither of these local authorities would have met the ethnic group quota, with Wokingham being 89.81% White British and Reading 80.62%. Similarly, Swindon the 8th lowest performing local authority in that academic year has been discounted due to a low cohort size, of only 113 pupils, and falling below the ethnic group level with 91.48% White British. Lastly, of the 10 lowest performing local authorities, two had sufficient cohort size but did not meet the ethnic group quota. This has excluded both Bristol and Salford, which were identified with 88.04% and 92.01% White British. However, regardless of these criteria, the five local authorities that have been identified were amongst the ten lowest performing.

In applying the above criteria to the 2001/02 local authority achievements at 5+ GCSE grades A*-C by FSM and gender, the local authorities to be included as case studies are, in order of performance from lowest to highest: Barnsley, Kingston-Upon-Hull, Doncaster, Sunderland, and Durham.

6.5 2001 – 2010: What does the data tell us?

6.51 Barnsley

Beginning with the lowest performing local authority which met all of the case study criteria, Barnsley is a post-industrial market town in South Yorkshire. Barnsley's former major heavy industry was coal mining, with the headquarters of the National Union of Mineworkers being based in the town where it can still be found to this day. Between 2001 and 2011, its population grew from 218,000 to 231,000. In 2001, Barnsley's demographics per age group showing that it was home to almost 44,000 under 16s, approximately 20% of the local authority's population. In terms of the ethnic group demographics, at the 2001 national census Barnsley was 98.12% White British,⁸ making it the local authority area amongst the five with the highest percentage of White British residents at this point. This had slightly decreased to 96.10% White British a decade later, positioning Barnsley second in terms of White British residents.⁹ In May 2001, shortly before that year's general election, the average percentage of unemployed claimants across the three parliamentary constituencies^a that

^a Unemployment rate by local authority data is unavailable. However, parliamentary constituency data offers a reasonable approximation. In 2001 this was Barnsley Central, Barnsley East & Mexborough, and Barnsley West & Penistone.

cover Barnsley was 4.5%. There is a notable difference between the sexes in the unemployment data with female unemployment half the rate of males in Barnsley, with average male unemployment of 5.76% and female of 2.7%.¹⁰ By May 2010, the average unemployment rate across the three constituencies^b stood at 6.43%.¹¹

According to the Indices of Deprivation (IOD) 2000,^c Barnsley was the 16th most deprived local authority in England.¹² This ranking would steadily improve over the period, with subsequent Indices placing the town 27th in 2004,¹³ 41st in 2007¹⁴ and 44th in 2010¹⁵. However, Barnsley would never rank outside of the 50 most deprived local authorities in England. In the two most important economic indicators of the six^d that comprise a local authority's rank in the IOD, Income and Employment deprivation, Barnsley ranked 41st and 21st respectively in 2000. Again, throughout the majority of this period Barnsley would remain within the 50 most deprived areas for both of these metrics, with the exception of ranking 52nd and 54th in 2007 and 2010 respectively for Income Deprivation.

As for Barnsley's household composition, at the 2001 national census there were 92,165 households, increasing to 100,734 a decade later. In terms of dwelling type by tenure in 2001, over a quarter, 25.69% of households were social housing compared 64.16% owner-occupied. This was above the national average for tenure of social housing in England of 19.27%, but below the owner-occupied average of 68.72%.¹⁶ By 2011, the tenure of social housing the local authority had decreased, in percentage and absolute terms, with 20.9% of households recorded as being social housing. In comparison, owner-occupied remained largely stable at 64.8%.^e This continued to be above England's national average for social housing of 17.7%, while a larger decrease in the national average of owner-occupied tenure, decreasing to 64.2%, resulted in Barnsley being above this figure despite its own decrease in owner-occupied households.¹⁷

^b In 2010, this was Barnsley Central, Barnsley East, and Penistone & Stocksbridge.

^c The local authority with the rank of 1 is the most deprived in the country.

^d Seven indicators have been used from 2004 onwards.

^e This decrease in the number of households recorded as social housing is reflected in the increase in the number of households classed as private rented accommodation, rising from 7.25% in 2001 to 12.7% in 2011.

Most significantly, the composition of these households included 7.32% of residents reporting that they were lone parents with dependent children. This was higher than the national average for England of 6.42%. Although this single digit figure may seem insignificant, of Barnsley's 92,165 households at the 2001 census, this equated to 6746 lone parent households with dependent children in one of England's most deprived local authorities.¹⁸ By 2011, all of the above figures had increased. There were 7.9% of 100,734 households reporting that they were lone parents with dependent children, equating to 7957 households. This was again higher than England's average of 7.1%.¹⁹

In Barnsley's secondary schools, there were 1344 male pupils who sat GCSE examinations in 2001/02 academic year, with 259 of those being eligible for free school meals equivalent to approximately 20% of all male pupils. Of these 259 pupils, only 7.7% achieved the benchmark of 5+ GCSE grades at A* - C, while more than three times that number of the same cohort, 22%, passed no GCSE examinations at all.²⁰ The 'No GCSE passes' figure would continue to be higher than the benchmark for the subsequent two years, albeit with the latter closing the gap.^{21 22 f} The percentage of FSM eligible boys achieving this benchmark would rise unevenly until it reached 46% in the 2009/10 academic year. However, while this is a laudable improvement, the introduction of English and Maths as part of the floor standard removed the façade of an overall rising tide of GCSE attainment and revealed substantive educational deficiencies in core subjects. When accounting for English and Mathematics as part of the 5+ GCSEs grades A* - C, the percent of FSM boys achieving this target more than halves to just 20% of 198 in 2009/10. The available figures demonstrate nonuniform improvements from 2005/06 onwards, with a low of 9% of 197 pupils in 2006/07.²³

6.52 Kingston-Upon-Hull

The second lowest performing local authority in 2001 was Kingston-Upon-Hull, a large city on the Humber estuary. The city was formerly known as a major port of the trawler fishing industry, with a significant part of the population employed on either the trawler ships or in the fish factories on the shore. In 2001, the population of Hull was recorded as 244,000, with a population of 52,000 under 16-year-olds. The population of the city would rise to 256,000

^f The Government would cease to publish this specific figure from 2003/04 onwards.

by the time of the 2011 census. The ethnic group demography of Hull as captured by the 2001 census shows that 96.36% of respondents considered themselves to be White British,²⁴ with this figure decreasing to 89.70% in 2011.²⁵ As of May 2001, the average unemployment rate across the three constituencies^g that cover the city was 7.2%. Similar to Barnsley, male unemployment was almost more than two and a half times that of female across all three constituencies, and averaged 9.4% compared to 3.8%.²⁶ In May 2010, the month of that year's general election, average unemployment across the city stood at 11.26%.²⁷

The IOD 2000 would rank Hull as the 14th most deprived local authority.²⁸ Across the four separate IOD studies published between 2000 and 2010, Hull was consistently measured as experiencing greater deprivation than the other four case study local authorities. In 2004 it placed 11th,²⁹ 16th in 2007³⁰ and 15th in 2010.³¹ It is notable that while the other four local authorities moved further down the rankings, becoming less deprived, over the course of the decade Hull's deprivation remained broadly constant. The economic indicators which contribute to the IOD 2000 ranking, Income and Employment deprivation, show Hull is similarly highly deprived in both categories at 15th and 11th respectively. Over the four separate IOD studies, Hull's lowest rank for both of these indicators is 20th achieved in the same year, 2007, before both dropped back to 18th in 2010.

Hull conforms to the trend of England's growing population during this period and is reflected in the city's household composition, with 104,288 households at the 2001 census and increasing to 112,596 as reported in 2011. The number of households by tenure in 2001 show that Hull's social housing was almost twice that of the national average at 33.23% compared to 17.93%. This contrasts with the city's owner-occupied dwellings which account for 52.15% of homes, significantly below the national average of 68.72%.³² In 2011, both of these figures for the city had fallen with 28.1% of dwellings being social housing, more than 10% above England's national average of 17.7%, and 50% owner-occupied, significantly below the national average of 64.2%.³³

^g Kingston Upon Hull East, Kingston Upon Hull North, and Kingston Upon Hull West and Hessle.

In the composition of households, the number of respondents in Hull reporting that they were lone parents with dependent children in 2001 was 8.93% or 9312 households. This was more than 2.5% above the national average.³⁴ A decade later, Hull would breach the 10,000 mark of lone parent households with dependent children with the 2011 census recording 9.1% of households, or 10,246 households in this category, exactly 2% higher than England's average.³⁵

In the first year for which data is available, the secondary schools in Hull entered 1612 boys for the GCSE assessment in 2001/02, with 359 eligible for FSM, equivalent to slightly above 22% of male pupils. The number of FSM eligible boys who achieved 5+ GCSEs A* - C was 28, or 7.9%. Similar to Barnsley, the number who attained no GCSE passes at all was almost 3 times this number, of 83 boys or 23.10%.³⁶ This latter figure would only marginally decrease, to 19.3%³⁷ and then to 17.2%, before the cessation of publication of the data.³⁸ In the 2009/10 academic year, Hull made a notable achievement in having 54% of FSM eligible boys attain 5+ GCSEs at A* - C. In contrast to this achievement, FSM eligible boys who achieved 5+ GCSE A* - C including English and Mathematics was only 10% of a cohort of 267 in 2005/06 and, although this figure would more double by 2009/10, this was still only 22%, or 70 of 316 pupils.³⁹

6.53 Doncaster

A large town in South Yorkshire for most of its history, which gained city status in 2022, Doncaster was the 3rd lowest performing local authority by GCSE performance of FSM eligible boys in 2001/02. Doncaster is a post-industrial town, whose major heavy industries included manufacturing and coal mining, with the town forming part of the former coalfield region that also encompasses Barnsley. In the period from 2001 to 2011, the town's population would grow from 286,866, which included 59,897 under 16-year-olds, to 302,402 in 2011. At the time of the 2001 census, the ethnic group demographics of Doncaster's population was recorded as being 96.5% White British⁴⁰ with this figure decreasing by almost 5% to 91.8% by 2011.⁴¹ The average unemployment rate in the constituencies^h that covered Doncaster in May 2001 was 4.7%, with male unemployment being more than double female in each

^h Don Valley, Doncaster Central, and Doncaster North.

constituency. Male unemployment averaged 6%, in contrast to female at 2.7%.⁴² In May 2010, the average unemployment rate across the constituencies was 7.73%.⁴³

In the rankings of the IOD 2000, Doncaster was placed as the 38th most deprived local authority area in England.⁴⁴ This position would be almost consistently maintained throughout the decade with Doncaster being ranked 44th in 2004,⁴⁵ 43rd in 2007⁴⁶ and 39th in 2010.⁴⁷ In comparison with the other local authorities, Doncaster became only marginally less deprived, sharing greater similarity with Hull, which also remained largely unchanged in the IOD rankings, whereas in comparison to both local authorities Barnsley gradually became less deprived. In reviewing the economic metrics that contribute to the IOD rankings, Doncaster was placed 19th for Income and 12th for Employment deprivation in 2000. Although Doncaster's overall ranking for deprivation remained largely consistent across this period, by 2010 Doncaster became less deprived as measure by Income and Employment deprivation, gradually improving its position to 34th and 21st respectively.

Doncaster experienced similar levels of population growth in the first decade of the 21st Century, which is reflected in the 2001 census with 118,699 households rising to 126,487 households in 2011. The dwellings by tenure in Doncaster during 2001 were comprised of 20.29% social housing compared to 69.58% owner-occupied. The former figure being 1% above England's national average and just under 1% higher for the latter.⁴⁸ Doncaster had the highest percentage of owner-occupied properties amongst the five local authority case studies, surpassing even the more prosperous County Durham. The level of both owner-occupied and social housing properties had decreased in Doncaster by 2011, with 65.7% owner-occupied dwellings. However, this was still above England's national average of 64.2% albeit only marginally, and 17.8% social housing, almost exactly matching the national rate of 17.8%.⁴⁹

In Doncaster's local authority area, the composition of households in 2001 included 6.84% or 8119 as lone parent households with dependent children, the second lowest amongst the five local authorities in this case study and only narrowly above England's national rate of 6.42%.⁵⁰ By 2011, the percent of lone parent households had increased to 7.5% or close to 9500

households, which had become the lowest figure amongst the 5 local authorities, while retaining a similar margin above the national average of 7.1%.⁵¹

The 2001/02 GCSE attainment data for Doncaster shows that 1930 male pupils were entered for assessment, of which 299 were FSM eligible. This was approximately 15.5% of the cohort. The number who achieved the GCSE benchmark of 5+ grades between A* - C was 9% or approximately 27 pupils. In contrast, the number of no GCSE passes was more than double at 20.1% or 60 pupils.⁵² This increased in the following year to 23%⁵³ before falling back to 17%.⁵⁴ The number of FSM eligible boys attaining the GCSE floor standard would steadily rise throughout this period with a high of 58% in 2009/10. However, when applying the more stringent benchmark, the number of FSM boys achieving this more than halves to 24% of a cohort of 241, equivalent to 58 pupils after more than a decade of Labour government. Doncaster saw a low of 12% of FSM boys achieving this benchmark in both 2005/06 and 2006/07, or 28 of 237 pupils and 30 of 250.⁵⁵

6.54 Sunderland

Sunderland is a large city in Wearside, and the fourth lowest performing local authority by GCSE attainment of FSM eligible boys in 2001/02, whose former major heavy industries include shipbuilding and coalmining. Such was the importance of the former industry to the city that it acquired the moniker 'the largest shipbuilding town in the world' and held a strategically important role in building and repairing mercantile vessels during the Second World War. In the period between 1939 to 1945, Sunderland produced 245 ships which accounted for approximately 27% of the UK's total output of merchant shipping.⁵⁶ In the decade between the 2001 and 2011 censuses, Sunderland's population was the only one amongst the five local authorities to decrease from 280,807 to 275,506, despite having a considerable population of 55,978 under 16-year-olds in 2001. In comparison to the demographics of England's ethnic groups, Sunderland had almost 10% more residents recorded as White British at 97.12% compared to 86.99% nationally.⁵⁷ By 2011, this has decreased slightly to 94.8% White British, which was still significantly above the national rate of 79.8%.⁵⁸ The average unemployment rate across the two Sunderland constituenciesⁱ in May

ⁱ Sunderland North and Sunderland South.

2001 was 6.9%, with unemployment data disaggregated by sex conforming to the pattern across the other local authorities. Male unemployment stood at 9% and 10.2% in contrast to female unemployment of 2.9% and 3.1% respectively.⁵⁹ A decade later in May 2010, unemployment in Sunderland Central was 9.3%.⁶⁰

Amongst the five local authority case studies in this chapter, Sunderland's level of deprivation was the second most improved with its standing moving 23 places from 15th in IOD 2000⁶¹ to 38th in 2010.⁶² This was only bettered by Barnsley's performance in the same period, which moved 28 places. This is despite its being the second most deprived of the five in 2000, being ranked a single place behind Hull. Sunderland shared greater similarities with Barnsley over this period, steadily improving its position, being placed 22nd in 2004⁶³ and 33rd in 2007,⁶⁴ in contrast to Hull and Doncaster whose positions remained largely unchanged. The economic deprivation indicators demonstrate a high level of deprivation in Sunderland, with it having the highest level of Employment deprivation of the five, being ranked 8th, and the second highest level of Income deprivation, ranking 15th. Despite the severe level of economic deprivation, Sunderland experienced considerable improvements in Income deprivation, achieving 28th in 2010, albeit this was not matched in Employment with only minor improvement to 11th in 2010. There is a broader story to be told in the contrasts between Sunderland and Hull, with the latter the most deprived of the five local authorities and the former ranked one place behind. However, Sunderland's deprivation was alleviated to a degree while Hull's remained largely constant.

Despite Sunderland's decrease in population over the decade, it still experienced a small increase in the number of households from 116,356 in 2001 to 119,758 in the 2011 census. The composition of Sunderland's dwellings were 60.23% owner-occupied with 33.53% social housing in 2001. The former was more than 8% below England's national figure, while the latter was more than 14% above the rate of social housing.⁶⁵ Amongst the five local authorities considered in this chapter, Sunderland had the highest percentage of households recorded as social housing in 2001, only marginally ahead of Hull by 0.3%. By the 2011 census, Sunderland had experienced a decline in both the rate of owner-occupied dwellings and of those in social housing, falling to 60.1% and 27.1% respectively. The former was below the national rate by 4.1% but the latter was significantly above by 9.2%.⁶⁶ In 2001, the percentage of households

comprised of a lone parent with dependent children in Sunderland was 8.03%, or 9343 households, the second highest amongst the five local authorities after Hull.⁶⁷ This would later marginally increase to 8.3% by 2011, or approximately 9939, approaching a not insignificant benchmark.⁶⁸

The educational attainment of FSM eligible boys in Sunderland during the 2001/02 academic year was the fourth lowest in England. There were 1945 male pupils entered for GCSE examinations, of which 285 were FSM eligible accounting for 14.65% of all male pupils. The number of pupils in this cohort who achieved the 5+ GCSE grades A* - C benchmark was 27 or 9.5%. In comparison, those who had no GCSE passes was 43 or 15.1%.⁶⁹ These figures would be maintained in the subsequent academic year with only a slight change of 1% in the 5 passes benchmark and 0.1% in the number of no passes.⁷⁰ Similar to other local authorities, the percentage of FSM eligible boys in Sunderland attaining the GCSE benchmark would steadily increase with it reaching 51% in 2009/10, the final year of Labour's time in government. This achievement is placed in sharp relief when contrast to the percentage of FSM boys attaining 5 GCSE including core subjects of English and Mathematics. Beginning at a low of 13% of 227 in 2005/06, or 30 pupils, this rose unevenly at an average of 1% per academic year, hitting a high of 19% in 2008/09 before dropping back to 17% of 276 boys in 2009/10, or 47 pupils.⁷¹

6.55 Durham

The final local authority case to be considered is County Durham,^j referred to as Durham from here on. The former major heavy industry across Durham is coalmining, with the former coalfield stretching as far as Wearside, and the Durham Miner's Gala remains an annual fixture in the calendar of political actors and activists within the Labour Party and trade union movement. The 2001 census records Durham's population as 493,470, with a population of 77,931 under 16-year-olds, growing to 513,242 in 2011. Durham's ethnic group demography was largely consistent across this period, with the 2001 census recording it as being 98.05% White British and 11% higher than the national rate.⁷² This also makes it the local authority area amongst the five with the second highest percentage of White British residents. A decade

^j County Durham consists of the boroughs of the City of Durham and Sedgefield, and five other districts: Chester-le-Street, Derwentside, Easington, Teesdale, and Wear Valley.

on, this figure would only slightly decrease to 96.6%. However, it would place it as the local authority with the highest percentage of White British residents, and 16.8% higher than England's national figure.⁷³ Across Durham's seven parliamentary constituencies,^k the average unemployment rate in May 2001 was 4.25%, with the area following the pattern of male unemployment being significantly higher than their female counterparts, with rates of 5.68% and 2.2% respectively.⁷⁴ In May 2010, the average unemployment rate across the seven constituencies was 5.95%.⁷⁵

The task of analysing Durham's level of deprivation compared to the other four local authorities is complicated by the IOD metric which has allocated a ranking to each district, rather than an overall grading. This means a variation in IOD 2000 rankings from as high as 4th for Easington but as low as 173rd for Teesdale.⁷⁶ The average rank of Durham's seven districts was 79th in 2000, 85th in 2004,⁷⁷ and 96th in 2007.⁷⁸ This would be reconciled by the structural reforms to local government in 2009, when Durham County Council was created. In the IOD 2010, Durham was ranked 70th.⁷⁹ In terms of economic indicators, the average rank across Durham's districts for Employment deprivation was 161st and 193rd for Income deprivation. Taking the lowest ranked district of Easington, it placed 65th and 96th in these measures respectively. Overall, this makes Durham by far the least deprived local authority compared to the other local authorities included in this chapter. However, we know that the level of deprivation is not uniform across the area with pockets of higher deprivation. This is reflected in the IOD 2010 economic indicators, which rank Durham 7th for Income deprivation and 5th for Employment deprivation.

From 2001, the number of households in Durham increased from 207,436 to 223,803 in 2011, reflecting the local authority's considerable population growth in the decade. The number of households in Durham which were owner-occupied was 66.94% with 25.44% social housing. This is slightly below England's average for owner-occupied households by around 2%, while the figure for social housing is higher by over 6%.⁸⁰ This demonstrates well the deprivation present in Durham, despite the perception that it is one of the more prosperous areas of North East England. Following local government reform in 2009, County Durham reported

^k Bishop Auckland, City of Durham, Darlington, Easington, North Durham, North West Durham, and Sedgefield.

66% of households were owner-occupied at the 2011 census, and 20.1% as social housing. Both figures were higher than the equivalent national rates, around 2% for the former and 2.5% for the latter.⁸¹

As of 2001, the number of Durham's households occupied by a lone parent with dependent children was 6.65%, or 13,794. This was distributed unevenly across the seven local government areas comprising Durham, with a low of 4.68% in Teesdale to a high of 7.43% in Sedgefield.⁸² By 2011, the overall figure for County Durham had increased to 7.7%, or 17,232 households, an increase of 20% from 2001. Although this percentage was lower than 3 of the other 4 local authorities, it was still above the national figure of 7.1%.⁸³

The performance of FSM eligible boys in GCSE examinations in Durham in 2001/02 was the fifth lowest with 9.8% attaining the benchmark of 5 GCSE passes A* - C. Amongst the cohort of 3,075 male pupils entered for assessment, 528 were FSM eligible, with 52 achieving the GCSE benchmark. The number of FSM boys who passed no GCSE examinations was more than double the benchmark figure at 20.8%, or 110 pupils.⁸⁴ In the following two academic years this figure would increase to 21.9%⁸⁵ before reducing to 14.1%.⁸⁶ Over the decade, the number of FSM boys attaining the benchmark would gradually increase until it reached 59% in 2009/10. In contrast to these figures, when core subjects including English and Mathematics are included in the benchmark, Durham's figures drop considerable, to a low of 10% of 563 boys in 2005/06, following a trend of annual increases to 26% of 450 in 2009/10, or 117 pupils.⁸⁷

6.6 Work, family, and the home

Across the five local authority case studies, several themes can be identified, these include economic factors, such as the role of work and industry, and social factors, such as family and the home, and broader cultural concerns. This part of the chapter will also draw on semi-structured interviews with elite political actors active during this period. Many common themes were identified in their responses to questions regarding secondary education and attainment policy towards white working-class boys between 1997 and 2010.

The first major theme was framed by the economic impact on these local authorities. A common trait across the local authorities was the loss of heavy industries, mainly coalmining, shipbuilding, and trawler fishing. These were male-dominated occupations with significant social, economic, political, and cultural impacts. The dangerous nature of these professions would've brought a level of job security and enhanced social status. A job at the local colliery, shipyard or on a trawler, in which fatalities were not uncommon, offered them dignity and pride in their work, with its essential nature intrinsically attached to the country's economic performance. In political terms, they were the archetypal professions of the labour and trade union movements, with political support building in both the industries and the cities around which they developed. The perceptions of secondary education amongst parents in these local authorities was impacted by both industry and their own experience of education. These industries would have had a significant impact of the local populations view of secondary education. A secure job, potentially for life, in a local industry was one factor which contributed to the view that an advanced education was a luxury, and not an essential. Parents own formative experience of education, of poor teaching and learning, introduces an element of path dependency to the subject, reinforcing these perceptions of education. This was also a theme that was identified by the political actors, with Alan Johnson remarking:

The other thing that really influenced me was Hull. Being an MP in Hull and seeing an absolute living and breathing example of education not being a priority because there was always a job down on the docks if you were a boy, fifteen years of age, go down on the trawlers, got no other occupation, but it didn't pay badly and if you were a girl there were loads of jobs in the fish processing industry so there was a mentality in Hull. It was an excuse culture. Well, you know, what do you expect, it's a fishing community largely and yes, you know whatever it was seventy-five percent of kids don't get decent GCSEs, let alone Maths and English, just didn't get five GCSEs. What do you expect, nothing was expected of them, their parents hadn't benefitted from education and their parents were part of the problem, you have to say. Wonderful people in many ways, but certainly not sold on education and would, yeah, encourage their kids to get out of school as quickly as possible. It was the absolute polar opposite where, so you had two groups in society, you had, and this was very much a class issue, and you know you had if

you were in one class, it would be unusual if you didn't go on to university, and in the other class it would be absolutely amazing if you did. So, I saw all that first-hand in Hull.⁸⁸

Similar themes were raised by other political actors, such as David Blunkett, raising the influence of both parental experience of education and local industry:

There is some good evidence in there [Sewell Report] and a lot of it is about, not just individual parents but the critical mass of the community that knows that education matters and is prepared to put their shoulder to the wheel. Whereas, in many deprived communities the parents just wanted their kids to get out of school as soon as possible and get a job, any job, and in fact were quite suspicious of education because their own education had been lousy. So, you were turning round expectation and aspiration, a whole culture, as well as nurturing individual youngsters as with How Green is My Valley. We were trying to say it's not just a few individuals here who we need to nurture and get into grammar school, through selection, it's a whole cohort, it's a whole generation that we need to transform.⁸⁹

This economic and cultural perception of the relationship between education and work was also remarked upon by Charles Clarke:

There's a whole set of aspects of quote laddish culture which are there, and I would say the deep fundamental issue, and I tried to address this throughout my time as Secretary of State, is the flawed relationship between education on the one hand and work on the other. That was another aspect of specialist schools by the way, was to bring local employers onto the governance of schools. But, to caricature it, people in the education system think they're doing great things for the kids in the schools, and once they go to work then it's all gone, and people in the work system say that these people who are being given education, which is no value to us if we're looking to employ people in that way. As I say, that's a caricature, but bringing together education and work is a very important thing, so

specialist schools is an important component of that, so too were foundation degrees at university level, and I think that the problem about so called laddish culture is people, boys, thinking they're going to go out to work immediately when they leave school, and therefore what's the point in school and therefore they develop whatever you characterise as laddish behaviour, to deal with that.⁹⁰

The second theme arising from the local authority case studies and in interview with political actors was the limitations of New Labour's conception of the state, with the difficulties political actors experienced in attempting to engage with two of the most significant factors in a child's education and attainment, family and the home, a common experience. Beginning with the first Blair administration, David Blunkett reflected that his ambition had been to "Let's try link with the home, I wish I'd done more of this because the home is absolutely fundamental as we see with the differential rates of success with ethnic minorities".⁹¹ In response to a question on the extent to which the Blair government focused on the issues of family and culture, Blunkett responded:

I had the understanding that family mattered. There were a number of changes that I think did make a difference. We'd also put a relatively, to the immediate past, a lot of money into adult learning and life-long learning and, you know, I was very keen on this and that was aimed at getting the parents involved. So, we were encouraging schools themselves to set up adult learning classes but also to invite parents into the classroom and where it worked well, it made a big difference, not least to the confidence of parents. I mean, a lot of the problem in families where there's not been a history of higher education is actually the family having that confidence and self-belief, not least when they're trying to help the children with their homework. I mean how can you help your child when you haven't got a clue what they're talking about? The retrenchment into a bunker, the kind of put up your defensive forces is bound to be there. So, actually helping adults to feel confident, even at the basic level of literacy and numeracy, really made a difference.⁹²

This line of thought, that schools had to extend out into the community to engage with parents who may not have had adequate teaching and learning themselves, within the first term Blair administration was corroborated by Blunkett's then Schools Minister, Estelle Morris.

We had a homework policy that wasn't so much homework but trying to link the home and the school. It was less about how much work children did at home but more trying to give examples of how all parents could play a part in helping with their child's schoolwork. It was trying to support families who might not naturally do this. An example might be to tell parents what they had done at school that day. It was trying to encourage a culture of parents saying to the child from being little, what you've done at school, to when they're older, do you want to show me the work and how did it go?⁹³

More broadly, on the theme of family and the home, Morris outlined secondary education policies intended to ameliorate the absence of activities and behaviours which support the learning and education of children in families and the home.

Children often achieve despite the obstacles placed in their way. For some children, we just make it very hard, and I suppose you try to work with the family, so that you help the family to provide the support, or the school takes on that role. I think that at primary level, you work with a family because it's doable. At secondary level, it is sometimes more difficult to work with a family. If you've not engaged parents in their child's education at primary school it's difficult when children get to secondary age as parents don't naturally come into school a lot, in the way that parents of primary aged children do. So, I think in our term of office, we had a lot of initiatives that were trying to provide some of the support for children that others may have got from home. I would think of the mentors, after school clubs, breakfast clubs. These are good things in their own right but it was also trying to compensate for what was sometimes missing from home. So, I think we always felt that we had to address inequalities in the opportunities to learn outside school as well as in school. As Labour Party people, I think that's partly where we come from, this empathising the fact that there are barriers to learning

that society has, and families have and you have to put effort into all these things. I think as Labour politicians, we're hugely empathetic to that and feel that politics should be doing something about it.⁹⁴

In Blunkett and Morris' responses, New Labour's early conception of the state and its reach, is not limited as to its ability to influence families and the home environment. Instead, there is an active attempt, through a number of policies to both connect the state with families through adult education and to utilise the levers of government to minimise disadvantage, and thereby create a level playing field through education policy and schools.

One notable aspect to the responses to questions on family and the home was the involvement of fathers and their interest in a child's education. As outlined by Johnson:

The problem was dads, the big problem wasn't mums, it was dads. How do you get men? This cultural thing that we were talking about, it really affected the men more than the woman, and it wasn't seen as a man's job to go to parents' evenings or to go to, you know, they'd come along to the nativity play when little John or James was seven or eight, but then they wouldn't go into the school after that.⁹⁵

This was similarly highlighted by Ed Balls, who noted the use of subject specific methods to engage parents were more successful:

I think one of the interesting things during that period was one of the types of school, which was having the fastest increase in results, particularly in maths, was sports sponsored colleges. The sports colleges were doing better and actually one of our theses was that sports colleges, loosely a secondary school, a comprehensive school with a sports speciality, were actually easier at engaging secondary school parents because you had an easier in. If you were, a sort of, a secondary school with a speciality in science it was hard to persuade the average dad to come to an after-school club. Whereas if it was about sport, it was easier for them to get through the door, come and help, and what those schools, a lot

those sports colleges were then doing was using sport as a way to get parents to engage in the educational progress of their children.⁹⁶

This highlights the fact that political actors occupying the education brief during the New Labour governments were aware of the social and cultural challenges surrounding father's and their role in a pupil's education. Together, with the data set out above concerning male unemployment and single parent households, the engagement of fathers in children's education proved a significant challenge to the New Labour governments. This was an issue that was difficult to resolve within the school gates and was therefore in tension with their conception of the state.

Potentially the most revealing insight into the Labour government's conception of the state comes from David Miliband. In reply to a question on the Labour government making the case for parents to take greater responsibility for and engaging with their child's learning, Miliband said:

We always said, look of course home confers advantage or disadvantage but that cannot be an excuse, it's the job of the school, or the schooling system, to push against disadvantage at home and our argument was schools have more agency, I mean you'll know what that word means, more leverage, more autonomy, more power than the left has traditionally given them credit for. Remember the argument was always, of course you've got poor results for poor kids because of all the home disadvantage. Our big argument was it doesn't have to be as disadvantaged as it is, in fact if you've got kids for seven hours a day, never mind if you have a longer school day, we haven't really talked about that because there was breakfast clubs and after school stuff, there was Gifted and Talented stuff in the summer holidays, and if that had been the only thing then that would have been just creaming people off but it wasn't, it was part of a wide suite of things that said we are going to maximise the ability of the public system to mitigate, push back against, socioeconomic disadvantage, and that public system has more power than the left has traditionally admitted and the reductionist view mistakes correlation for causation, and mistakes correlation for inevitability.⁹⁷

This line of thought was similarly expressed by Ruth Kelly. In response to a question on the impact of New Labour policies on the secondary education and attainment of White British working-class boys, she responded:

It's an empirical question up to a point, isn't it? It was certainly on our minds as we created these policies. That this was a particularly disadvantaged group whose educational needs needed to be addressed. That is definitely the context in which we were framing policy. So, the personalisation agenda, thinking about transition from primary to secondary schools, the emphasis on behaviour, keeping them involved in activities and using the, you know, school buildings for the extended hours agenda. All of that was implicitly thinking about groups that wouldn't otherwise have had the opportunities that, you know, perhaps people from more privileged backgrounds had.⁹⁸

In analysing the responses from these political actors, there is a dichotomy opening between some of New Labour's principal actors and thinkers. In Blunkett and Morris, there is an attempt to influence factors affecting pupils outside the school gates, primarily through the family and the home, and to a more limited extent, culture, whilst also implementing policies to attempt to alleviate aspect of disadvantage that would impact learning and attainment. Miliband's response, and to a more limited extent Kelly's, reveals the hard-headed nature of delivering transformative change in contemporary government. In order to affect outcomes, education policy and secondary schools were utilised as a blunt instrument to improve poor attainment within the school gates, through an effective school improvement strategy. An operational element of the education system that the government had direct control over. In this, Miliband contrasts with his former colleagues with a much more sceptical view of attempts to influence culture:

So we did do home school contracts, I think they were pretty good actually, I've got no data on them but I think they were pretty good. I think we did some stuff around PTAs, I can't honestly remember. But I don't think they were as significant as what we did in school and there's a very simple reason for that. Culture is much

harder to shift than pedagogy and teaching and provision, and so, I mean, I don't know what the latest data is but I think that, I don't like explanations that say well Asian culture explains why the Chinese are doing well and they're not really like the explanations that say well it's culture that explains white working-class because, first of all, what is that culture? Second, how uniform is it? Thirdly, how diverse is it across the country? And, fourthly, how amenable is it to change? And, so I've got no evidence that our parent stuff was particularly successful. So, but I stand to be corrected. ... We weren't the Department for Children and Families, we were the Department for Education and Skills and when I was working in the nineties, we were about education policy, not family policy. So, what we set out to do was mitigate the disadvantages kids faced, whatever those disadvantages were. ... Our job was to figure out how to make every school excellent or improving or both, and the word I would use is that, what we saw was to make our education offer more comprehensive in the best sense of the word. So, every conceivable disadvantage that a child brought into the school or the classroom or the college, we sought to mitigate through education policy.⁹⁹

6.7 Conclusion

To conclude, this chapter has attempted to demonstrate the attainment of White British working-class boys, who were eligible for FSM, between 2001 and 2010 through the use of five case studies focused on the lowest performing local authorities per GCSE results at the beginning of this period. As the second Blair government took office, the period was crucial for the attainment of England's pupils as the number of those leaving school at age 16 with no GCSEs in the lowest performing areas was more than three times the number of those leaving with five GCSEs in 2001/02. Furthermore, this period was significant to reinforce the foundational work conducted in Blair's first term, most notably on literacy and numeracy. Although the number of FSM boys leaving with five GCSE grades A* - C rose considerably in the five case study areas, most notably Doncaster (increasing by 34% from 24% in 2001/02 to 58% in 2009/10), these figures would drop dramatically when the core subjects of English and Mathematics were included in the GCSE benchmark. In the case of Doncaster, in 2005/06 this was 12%, rising steadily to 24% in 2009/10. In applying the same incremental approach to the academic years prior to the inclusion of English and Maths, despite the data not having been

collated, it is not an unreasonable assumption that in 2001/02 the number of FSM boys in each of the five local authorities achieving this benchmark could be in single figures.

A further theme present in this chapter, discussed through semi-structured interviews with elite political actors, is the Labour government's conception of the state and the tension between the views present: the extent to which it should actively seek to influence family and the home, or to mitigate these disadvantages through education policy.

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Chapter 7

Conclusion

This thesis set out to evaluate whether the secondary education and attainment policies of the Blair and Brown governments had delivered substantive improvements in the educational attainment of white working-class boys in England by the time New Labour left office in 2010. The initial chapter of this thesis sought to chronologically map the development of the Labour Party's secondary education policy in the post-war period up to the point in 1994 at which Tony Blair was elected leader. The following three chapters then mapped and measured the impact of the secondary education and attainment policies towards white working-class boys of the governments of both Blair and his successor, Gordon Brown. The final chapter departs from this method, instead adopting a case study approach to quantify and understand the educational performance of white working-class boys during New Labour's years in government. The original contribution of this thesis is three-fold. First, it is found in its contribution to the literature of political history and education policy by evaluating the secondary education policy of the New Labour governments. In recent years, there has been a paucity of literature authored by British political historians considering this policy area and has consequently been dominated by academics from other social science disciplines. Second, the inclusion of interview material with elite political actors, including every Secretary of State for Education throughout the period. Last, a further claim to originality lies in the use of the Alan Johnson's personal papers, as deposited at the Hull History Centre. To conclude, the findings of this thesis will be summarised, followed by outlining the limitations of the study and avenues for further research.

7.1 Summary of findings

The purpose of the second chapter of this thesis was to provide an analytical narrative of the development of the Labour Party's secondary education policy from the early 1940s up to 1994. Although this chapter is not central to the investigation of New Labour's secondary education and attainment policies, it mapped out the distinct phases in the party's history as the shifting ideational underpinnings and internal discourse slowly shaped policy.

In the third chapter, this thesis has sought to dispel the popular narrative considering Blair's education agenda in the first term, characterised as being solely focused on primary education is inaccurate. While primary was prioritised, Blair had a substantive secondary education agenda, that had been developed while in Opposition, with the objective of raising quality and standards in secondary schools to improve attainment. This agenda delivered only limited improvements in attainment for white working-class boys. The three major secondary education and attainment policies in Blair's first term were Fresh Start, Education Action Zones (EAZ), and Excellence in Cities (EiC). Fresh Start is generally considered to have been a success, as a last resort for school's which had failed to improve standards and attainment, this policy is credited with improving GCSE performance in disadvantaged areas, incidentally, affecting the outcomes of white working-class boys. In contrast, there is a consensus both amongst academic and official literature and amongst political actors that EAZs were found to have failed. The major policy programme of EiC can be considered to be of limited success. The findings of official literature and independent academic studies evaluating the programme found a broadly positive relationship in EiC participation and improved pupil attainment. However, when accounting for pupil characteristics, there was a negligible relationship between EiC participation and both gender and ethnicity. In contrast, Free School Meal eligible pupils made good progress in EiC schools, compared to their peers in non-EiC schools. In short, white working-class boys did not significantly benefit from attending schools participating in EiC. The very limited success experienced by these major policy programmes indicates that contributing factors outside of the school gates could have been influencing attainment. Reflecting on these findings, although Blair and other actors had made detailed plans in Opposition, they lacked an overarching or radical secondary education policy. This absence led to an iterative approach towards policy, resulting in a series of narrow and limited policies targeted at geographical areas or specific institutions with uneven outcomes.

A further finding in this chapter is that white working-class boys benefitted from the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies (NLNS). Although the focus of this thesis is secondary education, it was revealed during the process of investigation that the perspective of key political actors during Blair's first term was so that improvements in attainment in early years and primary schooling was a precondition of raising attainment at secondary. Furthermore, academic studies and official assessments have found that boys disproportionately benefitted

from this policy. Given its universal nature across England's primary schools, the NLNS, rather than the secondary policies, was transformative policy which delivered the rising tide that lifted all boats.

The fourth chapter of this thesis focused on the remainder of Blair's time as Prime Minister, specifically his second and third administrations from 2001 to 2005, and 2005 to 2007 when he left office. This period was characterised by Blair's thinking on a broader education strategy becoming clearer and more coherent. This resulted in a domestic agenda of public service reform, and in education specifically, the choice and diversity agenda. The major policies of this period of Blair's premiership were Academies, Specialist Schools, the London Challenge and Raising the Participation Age. In short, these policies were broadly, if not uniformly, successful. Academies replaced underperforming schools in deprived areas and significantly improved GCSE attainment. Similarly, the RPA was an historical objective for the Labour Party and because of its universal nature can be considered successful with more white working-class boys participating in education or training. This achievement can, with some confidence, be credited to Alan Johnson for initiating the policy. In comparison, the evidence of Specialist Schools improving GCSE attainment for white working-class boys is modest. Although official and academic assessments of the policy found that it did lead to improvements in GCSE outcomes, these were marginal gains. Lastly, the London Challenge was a transformational policy which demonstrably change the capital's secondary schools from the worst performing in England in the 1990s to the best performing by the early 2010s. The period of 2001 to 2007 could be marked a partial success, as the cumulative impact of Blair's policies secured improvements in attainment and ensured the continuing participation of white working-class boys in education and training to 18 years old.

The outcomes in secondary education were adversely impacted by factors including personnel change in key education roles and the foreign policy of the time, albeit to a lesser extent. In terms of personnel change, immediately prior to the 2001 general election, competent and experienced senior elite political actors occupied many of the most significant education posts. Most of who had occupied the same role for 7 years, stretching back to their appointment in Opposition in 1994. This longevity would not be achieved again. These elite political actors had been empowered by Blair to develop and deliver an agenda in education

to secure improvements in standards and quality and thereby raise attainment. Following the 2001 general election, Blair 'broke up the band' with promotions for David Blunkett as Home Secretary and Michael Barber who moved to Number Ten. Others, such as Conor Ryan left government, followed 16 months later by Estelle Morris. While retaining individuals in post is no guarantee of success, the DfEE is generally regarded as one of the most successful parts of Blair's domestic agenda in his first term. Similarly, there is a disagreement amongst political actors as to whether the major foreign policy events of Blair's premiership led to a loss of focus. On balance, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq do not seem to have impacted Blair's personal attention towards education. However, the pressure of attempting to concurrently pursue a major domestic reform agenda and secure foreign policy objectives, seems to have impacted the broader coherence of the Blair governments education policy agenda.

In the fifth chapter, it is argued that the secondary education and attainment policies of Gordon Brown's premiership were, to a significant extent, a consolidation of the Blair governments' policies. On becoming Prime Minister, Brown's support for the Academies programme confirmed it as a legacy of New Labour's secondary education agenda. Official and academic evaluations continued to find strong evidence of the efficacy of academies in raising GCSE attainment. The second major school improvement policy during Brown and Balls tenure was the National Challenge. This was inspired by the previous policies of GCSE floor targets and the London Challenge. This renewed focus on schools with the lowest GCSE attainment performances in England delivered increases in attainment, in core subjects such as English and Maths, for white working-class boys.

The sixth chapter adopted a case study method to provide a quantitative understanding of the impact of the New Labour governments secondary education policies on the attainment on white working-class boys in England. This was conducted by selecting from the lowest performing local authorities in 2001, those that could be considered mono-cultural areas with a high level of White British citizens. This was further refined by utilising government collated data pupil characteristic data, such as gender and Free School Meal (FSM) eligibility. Across those five local authorities, on the measure white FSM eligible boys who achieved 5 GCSE grades A* - C, this increased considerably. However, when this same metric is narrowed, so as to include English and Maths, these figures were significantly lower. This brings into question

the utility and value of GCSE qualifications in other subjects, if pupils struggle with reading comprehension, cannot adequately write or complete basic mathematics. These low results in compulsory subjects also raises questions about New Labour's secondary education policies and school improvement strategy over the 13 year period.

During the period of New Labour governments, there was essentially two Englands. The first is characterised by the government's secondary education policies on quality and standards leading to improved pupil attainment. The second, were groups that were as characterised by one of the key political actors of the period, Sir Michael Barber: "There are white working-class communities that effectively have not benefitted from the otherwise rising tide of educational achievement or haven't benefitted sufficiently."¹ This is reflected in the limited rise in GCSE attainment achieved by white working-class boys in the five local authority case studies. Therefore, New Labour's secondary education and attainment policies must be considered, at best, a partial success. While there is strong evidence for the contribution to improving attainment made by some policies, such as the Academies programme, the evidence for others is much weaker, such as Specialist Schools. This also speaks to New Labour's conception and role of the state in its education agenda. Schools can only mitigate disadvantage to a limited extent, as beyond the school gates, pupils are brought up in families, homes, and communities. Hence, the data included in chapter 6, strongly suggests that social and cultural factors, such as single parent homes and male unemployment, have an influential role in their upbringing and consequently impacts educational attainment. The Blair and Brown governments, which were committed to equality of opportunity and implemented a strategy of school improvement, led to limited increases in attainment for white working-class boys. In short, a stubborn dichotomy persisted as New Labour left office and can be summarised as such: white working-class boys from disadvantaged backgrounds consistently underachieved compared to their wealthier peers.

7.2 Limitations of the study and guide to further research

In the course of researching the subject of this thesis, both qualitative and quantitative sources of data have been utilised. There are two main limitations to this research. One limitation emanates from each data source. In the first instance, these concern the archival

material covering the Blair and Brown premierships. In the latter, this concerns the readily availability of government collated data.

The papers held at the National Archives covering the education policy of both Blair and Brown premierships are subject to the 20 year rule, following the amending of the Public Records Act in 2010. These include, most pertinently, drafts of legislation, policy documents, and speeches, including annotations. They also include more routine records such as correspondence between the Prime Minister and ministers, between themselves and other government departments.

The material relating to the early months of Blair's first government were released in July 2021. However, the final document releases for Blair will not occur until 2027 and those papers relating to Gordon Brown's time as Prime Minister until 2030. Although the popular narratives on New Labour and education are well known, few of the key political actors in this period have authored publications which have revealed the main factors that influenced decision-making on education policy in the 13 year period. This means there is significant scope for archival material to fill in gaps. A further indication of the value of this material is the large quantity which has been preserved. The first release of material covering only the first 8 months, from May to December 1997, of education policy consists of 8 separate records (PREM49/31 to PREM 49/38), which contains dozens of documents and runs to hundreds of pages.

A further, more intractable, limitation was the availability of quantitative data concerning pupil attainment at GCSE, by local authority, reported by a combination of identifying characteristics. These characteristics relate to gender, Free School Meal (FSM) eligibility and ethnicity. From 2001, early GCSE attainment tables were produced by the DfEE. These tables reported the data by local authority and disaggregated it by both gender and FSM status. Although GCSE attainment is disaggregated by ethnicity at local authority level, it is a standalone data set. This means it cannot be utilised in conjunction with GCSE attainment data sets disaggregated by gender and FSM eligibility at local authority level. Furthermore, although government would later publish the tables which utilised cross-cutting data including the three crucial pupil characteristics, these only reported the results at a national

level. The opaque nature of these data publications restricts the ability of researchers to obtain a more detailed and granular picture of educational attainment.

As a guide for further research, the key variables which impact educational attainment should be a priority for any investigation into the educational attainment of white working-class boys in England. Specifically, the extent to which there is a causal relationship between educational attainment and the influence of the home, family and culture, and the role of economic and geographic factors, such as regional inequalities and the funding and financing of education. Similarly, the extent to which the teaching profession has undergone serious change since James Callaghan's speech at Ruskin College in 1976 is worthy of study, as is the demographics of the school teacher workforce, which skews more than 75% female, this leaves few white working-class male teachers in secondary schools in England. One example of this is the London Challenge policy, which demonstrates the need to distinguish between social and geographical factors in educational attainment. In 2001, England's ethnic minority population was 4,461,805, with 2,069,148 of them living in London. This equates for almost 47% of England's ethnic minority population.² With almost half of the country's ethnic minorities living in the capital, the greater political attention and significant resources received by London has influenced educational attainment by transforming its secondary schools into some of the best performing at GCSE in England. As the white working-class population is spread across the country, any further research should acknowledge that, while cultural and social norms contribute to educational outcomes, this should not replace economic factors such as regional disparities and unemployment.

¹ Interview with Sir Michael Barber (Zoom, 6th May 2021) p. 3.

² Office for National Statistics, *Census 2001 Key Statistics for local authorities in England and Wales Part 1*, (London: The Stationery Office, 2003) Pp. 65 – 77. Available online: <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20160128182623/http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/census/census-2001-key-statistics/local-authorities-in-england-and-wales/index.html> [Accessed 25/06/2023].

Appendix

Appendix A – Table of Labour Party Government and Opposition Education Ministers from 1940 to Present¹

Office Holder	Term	Government / Opposition	Leader
Parliamentary Secretary to the Board of Education / Ministry of Education			
James Chuter Ede	15 May 1940 – 23 May 1945	Government	Clement Attlee
Minister of Education			
Ellen Wilkinson	3 August 1945 – 6 February 1947	Government	Attlee
George Tomlinson	6 February 1947 – 26 October 1951	Government	Attlee
No Shadow Cabinet posts prior to 1955²			
Shadow Minister of Education³			
John Edwards	July 1955 – March 1956	Opposition	Hugh Gaitskell
Michael Stewart	March 1956 – November 1959	Opposition	Gaitskell
Anthony Greenwood	November 1959 – November 1960	Opposition	Gaitskell
Fred Willey (Education) ^{4 5}	November 1960 – October 1964	Opposition	Gaitskell / Harold Wilson
Richard Crossman (Science and Higher Education) ⁶	February 1963 – October 1964	Opposition	Wilson
Secretary of State for Education and Science			
Michael Stewart	18 October 1964 – 22 January 1965	Government	Wilson
Anthony Crosland	22 January 1965 – 29 August 1967	Government	Wilson
Patrick Gordon-Walker	29 August 1967 – 6 April 1968	Government	Wilson
Edward Short	6 April 1968 – 19 June 1970	Government	Wilson
Shadow Secretary of State for Education and Science			
Edward Short ⁷	19 June 1970 – 6 December 1972	Opposition	Wilson
Roy Hattersley	6 December 1972 – 5 March 1974	Opposition	Wilson

Secretary of State for Education and Science			
Reginald Prentice	5 March 1974 – 10 June 1975	Government	Wilson
Fred Mulley	10 June 1975 – 10 September 1976	Government	Wilson / James Callaghan
Shirley Williams	10 September 1976 – 4 May 1979	Government	Callaghan
Shadow Secretary of State for Education and Science			
Gordon Oakes	4 May 1979 – 14 July 1979	Opposition	Callaghan
Neil Kinnock	14 July 1979 – 2 October 1983	Opposition	Callaghan / Michael Foot
Giles Radice	2 October 1983 – 13 July 1987	Opposition	Neil Kinnock
Jack Straw	13 July 1987 – 18 July 1992	Opposition	Kinnock
Shadow Secretary of State for Education			
Ann Taylor	18 July 1992 – 20 October 1994	Opposition	John Smith / Tony Blair
David Blunkett	20 October 1994 – 19 May 1995	Opposition	Blair
Shadow Secretary of State for Education and Employment			
David Blunkett	19 October 1995 – 19 May 1997	Opposition	Blair
Secretary of State for Education and Employment			
David Blunkett	19 May 1997 – 8 June 2001	Government	Blair
Secretary of State for Education and Skills			
Estelle Morris	8 June 2001 – 24 October 2002	Government	Blair
Charles Clarke	24 October 2002 – 15 December 2004	Government	Blair
Ruth Kelly	15 December 2004 – 5 May 2006	Government	Blair
Alan Johnson	5 May 2006 – 27 June 2007	Government	Blair
Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families			
Ed Balls	27 June 2007 – 11 May 2010	Government	Gordon Brown
Shadow Secretary of State for Education			
Ed Balls	11 May 2010 – 8 October 2010	Opposition	Harriet Harman (interim)
Andy Burnham	8 October 2010 – 7 October 2011	Opposition	Ed Miliband

Stephen Twigg	7 October 2011 – 7 October 2013	Opposition	Miliband
Tristram Hunt	7 October 2013 – 12 September 2015	Opposition	Miliband / Harman (interim)
Lucy Powell	12 September 2015 – 26 June 2016	Opposition	Jeremy Corbyn
Pat Glass	27 June 2016 – 29 June 2016	Opposition	Corbyn
Angela Rayner	1 July 2016 – 5 April 2020	Opposition	Corbyn
Rebecca Long-Bailey	5 April 2020 – 25 June 2020	Opposition	Keir Starmer
Kate Green	27 June 2020 – 29 November 2021	Opposition	Starmer
Bridget Phillipson	29 November 2021 – Present	Opposition	Starmer

¹ Simon, B. *Education and the Social Order 1940 – 1990*, (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1991). Pp. 569 – 570.

² Williams, P. M. *Hugh Gaitskell*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982). p. 273.

³ Punnett, R. M., 'The Labour Shadow Cabinet, 1955 – 64', *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol. 18 (1), (Aug 1964). p. 64.

⁴ No Author. "Allegation of 'Cabinet Split' on Defence", *The Guardian*, 21 September 1964. p. 3.

⁵ Nash, R. 'Wilson Faces A Crisis Over Crossman', *Daily Mail*, 18 May 1964. p. 3.

Despite Willey formally holding the education portfolio in the Shadow Cabinet, recent literature often mistakes Crossman as occupying this role, however contemporary sources demonstrate that demarcation of remits was a live issue at the time.

⁶ Honeyman, V. *Richard Crossman: A Reforming Radical of the Labour Party*, (London: I.B.Tauris, 2007). p. 29.

⁷ Hatfield, M. 'Mr Short named Shadow leader of the Commons', *The Times*, 7 December 1972. p. 1. From 6 Dec 1972, Edward Short represented social services and education in the Shadow Cabinet, while Hattersley became education spokesman only.

Appendix B – List of interview participants

Lord Adonis

Ed Balls

Sir Michael Barber

Lord Blunkett

Charles Clarke

Alan Johnson

Ruth Kelly

David Miliband

Baroness Morris

Conor Ryan

Appendix C – Example of interview guide and questions

Interview guide: David Blunkett

Interview participant: Lord Blunkett

Role:

Shadow Secretary of State for Education (and Employment) 20 Oct 1994 – 19 May 1997

Secretary of State for Education & Skills: 19 May 1997 – 8 June 2001

Date & Time: 5:25pm – 6pm, 31st March 2021

Location: via Zoom video call

Research question: Did the rising tide of state education lift all ships? An investigation into secondary education and attainment policy towards white working-class boys in England, 1997-2010.

Background

Topic 1: Background

- I'm aware of your personal biography, but I wanted to start off by asking how your views and attitudes on education were developed and shaped by your background, personal experience of education and career?
- How did those views and attitudes towards education, inform what you did as Secretary of State?

Opposition (1994 – 1997)

Topic 2: Priorities on appointment as Shadow Secretary of State

- On your appointment as Shadow Secretary of State, did you arrive with a specific agenda, or did you develop one once you arrived?
- What would you say were the most important issues in education when you were appointed?

Topic 3: Policy development

- Your predecessor as Shadow Education Secretary, Anne Taylor, spent two years drafting Opening Doors to a Learning Society, why was this approach rejected by yourself and the Labour leadership?
- In Diversity and Excellence (1995), and then in the School Standards and Framework Act (1998): You set out reforms to the organisation and structure of schools, to community,

voluntary aided and foundation. Why were structural changes to education necessary to improve standards and attainment?

- In Excellence for Everyone (1996), you identified a drop-off in apprenticeships particularly affected boys, leading them to see no point in education. What was your response?
- Going into the 1997 General Election, why wasn't reform of secondary education given the same priority as primary education?
- Did concerns about the potential financial cost or the ability to deliver reform of secondary education prevent it being a greater priority?
- During your time in Opposition, how important was the influence of then advisors such as Michael Barber, Conor Ryan and David Miliband in forming education policy?

Government (1997 – 2001)

Topic 4:

- In Government, there was a series of initiatives in secondary education, Fresh Start, Education Action Zones, Excellence in Cities, how successful were they in raising standards and attainment in deprived areas?
- These relatively small-scale initiatives pursued in secondary education, what were the barriers to more wide-ranging reforms?
- In your diaries, you say that from March 2000, secondary education became the key task for yourself in the final 15 months of Government, and particularly, schools where 25% or less of pupils gained 5 or more A – C grades at GCSE. Why was this the case?
- Your colleague Lord Adonis reflected that he believed secondary schools went slightly backwards in the first term and that the reforms to Grant Maintained schools were a mistake. Would you agree with that assessment?

Topic 5: Behaviour and attendance

- In a March 2000 speech, entitled Transforming Secondary Education, you identified the gender divide in attainment, particularly boys' underachievement, to what extent did the policies you pursued ameliorate this issue?
- To what extent did you seek to tackle the issue of 'laddish culture' in secondary education?

Topic 5: Family and Culture

- Previous interviewees have identified cultural issues as having a significant influence on a pupil's education.
- Can I ask what were the cultural issues you had to face before Government policy could be implemented or legislation could be passed?
- What specific policies and initiatives did you take to tackle these cultural issues?
- In a broader sense, to what extent did you focus on family and culture during your time in office?
- To what extent did you and New Labour succeed in helping white working-class boys?

Topic 6: Political situation

- How did the relationship between No. 10 and 11 impact your role at education?
- Connected to that, what influence did your special advisers have in Government?

Topic 7: Conclusion

- Reflecting on your time as Secretary of State, how would you characterise your impact on education?
- Is there anything you regret about your time?
- Is there anything else you wanted to add?

Appendix D – Example of interview transcript

Interview transcript: David Blunkett

Interview participant: Lord Blunkett

Shadow Secretary of State for Education (& Employment) 20 Oct 1994 – 19 May 1997

Secretary of State for Education & Employment: 19 May 1997 – 8 June 2001

Date & Time: 5:25pm – 6pm, 31st March 2021

Location: via Zoom video call

Research question: Did the rising tide of state education lift all ships? An investigation into secondary education and attainment policy towards white working-class boys in England, 1997-2010.

Joseph Tiplady (JT): I'm aware of your personal biography, but I wanted to start off by asking how were your views and attitudes on education were developed and shaped by your background, personal experience of education and career?

David Blunkett (DB): I think I was inevitably affected by the reality that I faced, which was going to a special school for blind children that didn't offer qualifications at the age of sixteen. They offered you the opportunity to do vocational qualifications post-sixteen, but not the equivalent of GCSEs, which of course was a major disabler in terms of being able to make choices and progress. The fact that I had to go to evening class for three years running to get the six O-Levels that I needed to do A-Levels, and then when I got a job, to go to evening class and eventually to get day release from work to go to college to get the A-Levels, and a national certificate in business studies. I mean that did wrest with me because it was six years of my life to get to the point where I could apply for university, and I just didn't want youngsters to have to go through that absurdity of people making judgments about their lives, which didn't affect them. The head of my school had a PhD, I never quite understood where he was coming from in knowing that his qualifications got him where he was, but not allowing others or facilitating us being able to get the qualifications that would liberate us. So, it was a hard graft, I was pleased I did it, I sometimes look back and wonder how I did it, but it did affect my view that no child should be denied the opportunity if they're not in a position to take up an

academic route, then there should be a vocational route, but whatever it is they should not be denied that chance of liberating their talent and being able to climb the ladder.

JT: What would you say were the most important issues in education when you were appointed?

DB: Well, we'd been out of office, when I came into the brief in ninety-four, for, by then, fifteen years, and we were desperate to ensure that we reversed the negative messages of the past. The negative messages being that we were on the whole, we were against things in education. Sometimes with good reason, but we hadn't presented to the electorate, and particularly to parents, a very positive view of something different. So, we were trying to stop being bogged down in reacting to the Conservatives' agenda and instead to absorb what we thought was sensible and then move on. So, we thought that what was sensible from the nineteen eighty-eight changes that Ken Baker had brought in was a greater autonomy and responsibility, and therefore accountability for headteachers and leaders in school, and therefore what was then called the local management of schools, we felt that the changes that had been brought about with grant maintained schools was a phase too far because it separated out the schools into unnecessary categories, but we knew that simply saying we're going to abolish this was old style, lets go backwards, lets always be nostalgic, lets reflect on the past rather than learning from it and moving to the future. So, that's why we said lets adopt the best of this and call them foundation schools, lets accelerate the autonomy which eventually led to the Academy schools, which were never intended to be completely free standing by the way, I mean you'll have read the literature, the policy paper that came out in early two thousand and one (*Schools: Building on Success Green Paper*) was about giving schools that had been struggling real backing and support, and a further degree of autonomy but still linked into the local authority and to their neighbouring schools. So, we didn't see this as separation, we'd introduced the early stages of what became the London Challenge, which was all about collaboration, so, you know, the papers we were producing were not about going it alone, they were about fostering innovation and creativity, rather than a sameness. So, we didn't want a level playing field of mediocrity, we wanted a level playing field of creativity and innovation. Some of that worked, some of it didn't, that's life. You stand on the shoulders of those who come before you, but from ninety-four the imperative, to go back to your question,

was to reform for the future, not to retrench in the past, so, every measure including the decision to make standards, and not structures, the absolute imperative for secondary education, was crucial.

By the way, you're obviously researching and your doctorate's on secondary education, but you can't separate this out from the development of Sure Start, the first ever nursery education programme, literacy and numeracy programmes in primary, because secondary couldn't progress. We couldn't turn round deeply failing comprehensive schools if the primary schools and the early years before them hadn't actually done their job and done their work because otherwise those schools were always trying to play catch up.

JT: In *Diversity and Excellence*, which you published in 1995, there was a focus on reforms to the organisation and structure of schools. Why were structural changes to education necessary to improve standards and attainment?

DB: Simple failure. What had happened from the late nineteen sixties onwards is with the very, very best intentions we'd rebadged secondary moderns as comprehensives and where there'd been grammar schools, they had the structure and the teaching staff and, in many cases, the parental support to make it work, but where there'd been already poorly functioning, poorly performing secondary moderns, that's what they carried on doing and we said this is just not acceptable. For some schools, there was one on the edge of my constituency that got four percent of its pupils through five or more A to C grade GCSEs and okay, you can argue until the cows come home about whether these measures are meaningful and whether they're hoops that we shouldn't expect children to have to jump through at GCSE. They were an indicator of a total let down of those pupils. This particular school had a Head who believed in poetry and music and singing, and they were quite good at it, and I used to say but that is not an alternative to them being able to match their peers in other highly performing schools on the things that will get them into sixth form, sixth form college or further education and into adult life, you know, these are not alternatives. So, there was, it's hard to remember now just how bad things were, just how poor the results were for kids in the most deprived areas. Of course, it wasn't the case for the children in the most affluent areas, 'cos either parents would intervene themselves to do something about it or they'd

move house or they'd buy private education. So, it was a given that the children who were losing out most were the children that had always lost out, intergenerationally in terms of disadvantage and if you didn't do something about it you were reinforcing that intergenerational disadvantage, you were reinforcing inequality and therefore injustice. I couldn't understand why anyone from the Left would actually argue about a massive effort to transform those schools. It was partly reaction from teachers who'd been struggling and doing their best and had poor leadership, poor support, poor resources, badly constructed and often really poor buildings, who'd been struggling for years and just felt this draft of air, this tide, was another imposition, and we had to say let's recruit, recruit, recruit, let's get young people with ability into the profession, let's reward good teachers for staying in the classroom, they've done away with that but it was called Advanced Skills Teachers. Let's try link with the home, I wish I'd done more of this because the home is absolutely fundamental as we see with the differential rates of success with ethnic minorities which, although I'm not completely pleased with the way Tony Sewell's produced this report on behalf on Boris Johnson, there is some good research stuff I gather 'cos I haven't read the two hundred and sixty pages, but I've listened to a lot of it today. There is some good evidence in there and a lot of it is about, not just individual parents but the critical mass of the community that knows that education matters and is prepared to put their shoulder to the wheel. Whereas, in many deprived communities the parents just wanted their kids to get out of school as soon as possible and get a job, any job, and in fact were quite suspicious of education because their own education had been lousy. So, you were turning round expectation and aspiration, a whole culture, as well as nurturing individual youngsters as with *How Green is My Valley*. We were trying to say it's not just a few individuals here who we need to nurture and get into grammar school, through selection, it's a whole cohort, it's a whole generation that we need to transform.

JT: Going into the nineteen ninety-seven general election, why wasn't reform of secondary education given the same priority as primary education?

DB: I think the evidence we were presented with was that the foundation of success was going to be early years and primary. That we could make the biggest difference, most quickly if we concentrated attention in those areas. It's a moot point is the honest truth all these years on, nearly a quarter of a century on, as to whether it would've been possible to have done a lot

more at secondary level than the things we did manage to achieve. I mean my view now is that we need a complete shake up of secondary education teaching any way, both the methods of teaching and what we teach, particularly how we teach it, and if I'd had the space and time and resource to do that then, I would've been happier now. But there is, the truth is, there is no day zero, you actually only have the capacity at any moment in time to shift the oil tanker, thinking of the Suez Canal, to shift the oil tanker from where it was stuck and to try and make progress. Whilst of course doing things at secondary, we were rebuilding as quickly as possible secondary schools' buildings so that there was real improvement there through the New Deal for Schools and that initially was a billion pounds, which in those days was a lot of money and compared brilliantly to the six hundred million a year that the Government was spending on school buildings that the time. There was the equipping of the schools with the, what was the emerging technology and again a lot of money was put into that. There was the Excellence in Cities programme, which was the forerunner of the London Challenge, which was trying to concentrate and focus resources, including on secondary, in transforming that transition. There were the summer schools which were focused on the transition between primary and secondary. None of it was so transformational that it was going to be completely acceptable and, in a sense, transformational, but it was progress. That's why we felt, look if we've got to concentrate anywhere it's going to be on early years and primary so that the secondary schools, as the children move from year six to year seven, will at least have a chance. We debated at great length and got all kinds of advice on that transition because we knew that at year seven and eight, children often fell back, which is a scandal, and I think it still is a scandal, and it's because the two elements of primary and secondary were not only not linking up but they were teaching completely differently.

JT: I want to move on to your time in government now. There was a series of initiatives in secondary education, some you've already mentioned, such as Fresh Start, Education Action Zones, Excellence in Cities, how successful were they in raising standards and attainment in deprived areas?

DB: I think they firstly changed the climate, the culture. It was a, Fresh Start in particular albeit it wasn't large numbers of schools, was a bit of an electric shock into the system that we simply weren't going to put up with it and either you did something about it yourself, and the

psychology was good there because it worked, or there would be major intervention. I think the best of those initiatives was Excellence in Cities because it was based on pedagogic evidence, and people actually being able to reinforce good practice and spread good practice fairly quickly. I mean we set up the Standards and Effectiveness Unit pretty quick, which was crucial to any of this, all the things we were able to do in those first four years was based on being able to bring people in. Initially Michael Barber obviously, but having the Permanent Secretary Michael Bichard and his renewed team, 'cos he did renew his team, to actually be prepared to sign up to the agenda of change and recognise that what we did from the department might just have some impact on what happened in the schools and in the preceding years this was not the case, and don't take my word for it have a look at Gillian Shepherds little book, which she called Shepherds Watch, I think it's page one hundred and fifty three from memory, where she just bemoaned not having any levers to pull. There's no point having an education and employment department if you didn't have any levers to pull. In other words, if you bemoaned and bewailed and wrung your hands about how awful things were but you didn't do anything about it. So, we were caught because we wanted this to be innovative and bottom up. We wanted the creativity of and autonomy of headteachers and teacher leaders to be able to think for themselves and, you know, work on what would be transformational based on what they knew about their schools and their school community, but we needed to do something pretty rapid from the top if we weren't to lose a generation. So, we were caught, and Estelle Morris and I made a good combination because she was much closer to the teaching profession. Both of us had teaching qualifications, I had a PGCE in post-sixteen teaching and she had taught in secondary and then in sixth form before coming into Parliament, so both of us were teachers. We understood where people come from, but we had to play hard cop, good cop. So, Estelle did the good cop bit except we did switch roles at one stage where Estelle had to take on the challenge of transforming the education authorities, and the intervention we made there in Islington and Liverpool, in Leeds and elsewhere, and we worked together and backed each other up on that.

JT: I want to move on to a speech you gave in March 2000, entitled Transforming Secondary Education, you identified the gender divide in attainment, particularly boys underachievement, to what extent did the policies you pursued ameliorate this issue?

DB: Nowhere near as much as I'd hoped. We knew what was wrong, we had some ideas about how to put it right, but we come back to the nature of teaching and how we teach and what we teach, and you know, in retrospect it has to take into account that firstly girls, on the whole, are much more mature than boys. I heard a Headteacher on the radio from Holland a week ago saying that, if you took a fourteen-year-old girl he assumed she was seventeen, if you took a fourteen-year-old boy he assumed he was twelve, emotionally, psychologically, in terms of their growth and what they could grasp. I don't think we've tailored education to the reality of the gender mix. We've always understood and preached that girls are better at continuous assessment and teamwork than boys were, and boys were better at cramming and doing final exams, I think that's a caricature by the way, but it did stand up to some extent, but we didn't have an education system that reflected those differences at all. So, white working-class boys and Caribbean boys, who mature, if they were going to mature more slowly then we should adjust the secondary education and post-sixteen system to take account of that, but we don't, so we plough on with the same old procedures and processes, and I think it was Einstein who said, did he not, that doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different outcome is the definition of insanity.

JT: I think you're quite right there David. Following up, to what extent did you seek to tackle the issue of 'laddish culture' in secondary education?

DB: We addressed it from the issue of bullying, as opposed to what is now on the agenda in terms of laddish culture vis-à-vis their emotional development and their relationship with the opposite sex or in these days the same sex but with a different orientation. I think we didn't do that because we were addressing more broad swathes of what was happening in terms of the nature of the way in which teachers approach pupils, I mean Peter Kilfoyle who was a junior minister, a shadow minister in my department he was then put in the Ministry of Defence, much to his chagrin, but he was a shadow minister, he used to talk to me a lot, as others have done since, about growing up in Liverpool and going to Catholic schools run by what he used to called the Brothers, and the kind of behaviour towards the boys that reinforced laddishness and brutality rather than diminishing it, and it struck me at the time that the issue of role models and how young men saw themselves was really, the two went hand in hand. What they experienced in their own homes and their own lives, and what they

then reflected in their relationship with young women was part of the same thing and whilst you can't take their masculinity out of men, you can take the laddish culture by them understanding themselves better and not feeling that this is about validation of their manhood.

JT: I want to go back to something you mentioned before about the home, family and culture. Previous interviewees have identified cultural issues as having a significant influence on a pupil's education. Can I ask what were the cultural issues you had to face in Government before policy could be implemented or legislation could be passed?

DB: I mean I was very fortunate because I had the support of the Prime Minister in terms of what we were trying to do. He invented the term education, education, education, not me, but I was very pleased to take on something that he saw as being absolutely central both to the well-being and life of the society, of nurturing talent and people being able to use their abilities to the best for themselves and developing independence and a family, but also because of the modern economy, the global economy and the competition we were facing and how this was based on what we used to call the knowledge economy, it still is but the terminology has changed, and therefore I had that support to be able to do it. There was still a lot of scepticism, including from my own backbenchers about what we were doing, whether it was going to succeed, whether we were pushing teachers too hard, but bear in mind that the teaching profession were well represented in Labour Party branches and constituency parties. So, you weren't just pushing at the profession, you were actually having arguments within the Labour Party from people thought that they were being beleaguered and blamed, and that wasn't the purpose at all it was trying to say we can do things very differently, we can transform the lives of children and you can be part of this, and we'll reward you better for doing it and we'll celebrate, as we did, good teaching. David Puttnam invented the and got the television BBC to actually put on prime time celebration of good teaching and good teachers, and that was part of the attempt to change the culture from being one of defensiveness to being one of rejoicing in doing well. Putting a hundred thousand plus teaching assistants in was to say you are a professional teacher, you are managing the learning experience of children, so the teaching assistants are crucial to what you can do. The use of technology, albeit we didn't train people well enough to use the technology, is going to be an

enabler so that you can modernise the way you teach. I mean, we just simply didn't, we provided the resource and very often schools bought equipment, old BBC computers as they are now, you know people will have forgotten, but we didn't necessarily teach teachers how to use them well. So, the lessons I learnt later was that you don't just need to equip people and hope for the best, you need to understand how to take them with you and to use that in a creative fashion. We still don't do that in universities. The last year has been a learning curve for most people teaching in universities, I'm just hoping that they learn the lessons and adapt and are creative rather than just dropping back into the more traditional lecture, tutorial, seminar systems.

JT: In a broader sense, to what extent did you focus on family and culture during your time in office?

DB: I had the understanding that family mattered. There were a number of changes that I think did make a difference. Learning Mentors when I left, we got three thousand of them were designed to be the link between home and school to be able to nurture children that just needed that extra outside school hours, we'd extended the school day actually using lottery money on the whole, but we had after schools' clubs, ability to use the library, to have a space for homework, self-learning. So, we got that link. We'd also put a relatively, to the immediate past, a lot of money into adult learning and life-long learning and, you know, I was very keen on this and that was aimed at getting the parents involved. So, we were encouraging schools themselves to set up adult learning classes but also to invite parents into the classroom and where it worked well, it made a big difference, not least to the confidence of parents. I mean, a lot of the problem in families where there's not been a history of higher education is actually the family having that confidence and self-belief, not least when they're trying to help the children with their homework. I mean how can you help your child when you haven't got a clue what they're talking about? The retrenchment into a bunker, the kind of put up your defensive forces is bound to be there. So, actually helping adults to feel confident, even at the basic level of literacy and numeracy, really made a difference. Continuing that, carrying that forward, the continuity of reform and change is something that we understood but wasn't necessarily carried forward when attentions went elsewhere.

JT: To what extent did were yourself and New Labour successful in helping improve the attainment of white working-class boys?

DB: I think through the Excellence in Cities programmes and the effort to help with fourteen- to sixteen-year-olds in terms of mixing school and potential work experience and vocational opportunities worked a little, but it wasn't so transformational that you could put your finger on it and say this really did make a difference to opening up the, well, the escalator really for those youngsters. There was still far too many who were NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training), who just disappeared off the register, who weren't engaged with alternative education providers. We did some work with, we put half a billion into the alternatives which sometimes were bout absenteeism, sometimes about behaviour in schools the, very often, off campus learning units. We had both, we had units within the campus, and we had off campus units, and looking back, what you needed to do was have a, if you like, a variety of opportunities for those youngsters. The alternative providers weren't properly under Ofsted and were very often out of sight, out of mind, and that's a regret because with imagination and a bit of enterprise, could've put something on that was very different that got youngsters to, there was some of this, that got youngsters to learn by the things they were interested in. Repairing or renovating a motorbike or something that really interested them. One of the experiments was with football clubs, the after school learning opportunities and for a time that did work with working-class white youngsters, who went along and part of their catch up with the after school clubs, Playing for Success it was called, was to get them involved because they learnt about maths and geography and other academic subjects because the club was the learnt about the running of the club, the funding of the club, the global reach of the club, the club who they played, where they were, both nationally and in terms of Europe. Those kinds of initiatives had some real purchase and made a difference, but I don't think they've ever been, you're doing a PhD so you'll be able to find out about this, I don't know whether they've been properly research in terms of the difference they made.

JT: I'll make this the last question. Reflecting on your time as Secretary of State, how would you characterise your impact on education?

DB: I think that's an extraordinarily difficult question. You'd have to read Michael Barber's book, *Direction to Deliver*, I'm not the best judge. I mean, all I know is, given the history of the period before I came in the pressures and resistance and barriers, the opportunities and resources that I was eventually able to mobilise, I don't think I could have done any more. I think that, I'd love to have done and in retrospect, I keep thinking, could have I done, was there more that could have been done in parallel? Could we have pushed people harder without breaking the bank, without resistance then leading to retrenchment? So, pressing so hard that you made three steps forward and two back, rather than two steps forward and none back. Really hard to make a judgement on that, I like to think, and I would always like to think that it was the beginning of a new era, a foundation on which others could build.

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