

‘Selection isn’t about better schools, it’s educational apartheid’

Hélène Mulholland

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Comprehensive campaigner Melissa Benn tells Hélène Mulholland how her values have been shaped by her education and highly politicised family, and why she believes the end of selection can be achieved ▶

Melissa Benn says she is “very grateful” to her parents for sending her to a comprehensive school. Now, she wants everyone to enjoy the same opportunity. That is why she is on a mission to end the “educational apartheid” of England’s partially selective system. For the past four years, Benn has chaired Comprehensive Future, a campaign group that seeks the abolition of the 11-plus and selective

schools, and the implementation of a fair and inclusive admissions system.

“Are we a country that wants to invest everywhere in all our children or are we a country that wants to sort them out largely on grounds of social class before they hit adolescence?” she asks. “I know which society I want to be in.”

Benn is fiercely opposed to a test that makes so many children wrongly believe they are failures, she says. And she has been around politics long enough to know that “if you think a thing is right, you just keep arguing for it”.

Just as well, given that she is working against the government grain of grammar school expansion. She was, though, buoyed by the “outcry” from many teachers and educationalists when prime minister Theresa May originally suggested allowing new grammar schools in 2016. Alongside Comprehensive Future, she is also one of the co-founders of the Local Schools Network, set up in 2010 in response to Michael Gove’s reforms during his tenure as education secretary. The web-based campaign group seeks to defend state schools “already doing a good job” and to promote comprehensive education.

Benn has first-hand experience of the system she advocates: she and her three brothers attended Holland Park School in West London, one of the first comprehensives in the country.

When she came home from school at night, it was to a rather high-profile set of parents: her father was the late Tony Benn, the politician on the Left of the Labour Party who renounced his hereditary peerage to sit as an MP; her American mother, Caroline, was an academic, biographer and author.

Renowned in education circles for her commitment to comprehensives, Caroline Benn wrote two books on the British system, and was the co-founder of the Campaign for Comprehensive Education and a member of the Inner London Education Authority. The family also had in its midst a formidable figure in the shape of Tony Benn’s mother, Margaret – a feminist who campaigned for the ordination of women in the 1920s. And their political pedigree stretches all the way back to the 19th century, with Melissa Benn’s grandfather and two great-grandfathers having also served in

Parliament. Today, her older brother Hilary, a former cabinet member, sits as a Labour MP for Leeds Central.

Despite this, Benn describes her family as “very down to earth” and one that, unsurprisingly, “talked politics a lot”.

After achieving a first in history at the London School of Economics, Benn became a journalist, writer, novelist and, more recently, public campaigner and speaker. Her experience of teaching was in adult education, where she taught feature writing – a role that she “absolutely loved”. She has released several books, including, like her mother, one on comprehensive education (*School Wars*), and she has another due out in September.

Benn says positive memories of her years in a comprehensive school mean that she has always been keen to counter people’s prejudices about an education background such as hers.

But despite Holland Park’s status as a comprehensive pioneer, the grammar school approach of the era was still evident when she started there. “The head and senior leaders wore black gowns,” she says. “It was quite conservative and old-fashioned with full uniforms.

“It was heavily streamed, and the white middle-class children tended to be in the top stream and the Windrush-generation Caribbean children tended to be concentrated in the lower streams; it was an absolute picture of class and ethnic segregation.”

But there were many “brilliant teachers”: she singles out by name her English, history and French teachers, whose lessons she can still recall today. “I think Holland Park was a good example [of what a good comprehensive education does],” she says. “At its best, it was just amazing. It was so creative and some of the teachers were inspiring.”

Comprehensive benefits

The other benefits of her education were the “creative element” – which she laments as now being on the wane – and, crucially, the social mix.

“I do think that different schools create different kinds of citizens, and I do see a difference in my own peer group [between] people who went to private or grammar schools and myself – there’s just a

difference. It almost comes down to a different way of talking, assumptions, friends and so on.”

It was when her two daughters reached school age and she saw that “parental choice tended to benefit the parents with more choice” that she first became involved in serious campaigning.

Her girls went to the local secondary in north-west London, “which was not I think it’s fair to say the school of choice for most of the middle class here at that time”. Not only did they love it, and thrive, but she saw other children from different backgrounds benefiting, too. “You can have children who come from poorer backgrounds, disadvantaged backgrounds, lower-middle-class backgrounds, who go to a committed, energetic, hardworking comp and they can go as far as they want to and I saw that at the school.”

Her formal campaigning kicked off in 2006 when she penned a pamphlet on the education system with her friend Fiona Millar, a journalist and fellow comprehensive education advocate. She joined Comprehensive Future around eleven years ago and became chair in 2014 when Millar stood down.

The campaign body was set up in 2003 in response to New Labour doing little around existing grammar schools other than passing legislation in 1998 to stop new ones being created.

Benn argues that this failure to act more decisively sowed the seeds for the further growth of selective schools now.

Her campaigning, of course, has echoes of her mother Caroline’s work. But for Benn, it’s less a case of following in her footsteps than having shared family values. “These days I see myself as a proud part of a long tradition – and you’ll find all families have political traditions – rather than carrying on something she did.”

She recalls her mother as “very funny”, “very American and informal”. What does she think Caroline would make of today’s education landscape? “I think she just would have rolled her eyes that we are back here again.”

Comprehensive Future has been tracking grammar schools’ expansion applications. Last week, with the deadline looming, it revealed that a total of 35 of the selective schools were bidding to grow.

If all applications prove successful, this will amount to an additional 1,089 pupils a year. Over a five-year period, this would mean 5,445 extra pupils in selective schools – the equivalent, the campaigners say, of seven new grammars.

The group also analysed consultations earlier in the process and found that many failed to include plans to increase social mobility – a core requisite for expansion – at this stage.

Benn claims that, ultimately, the requirement to increase the disproportionately low number of disadvantaged pupils in grammar schools is “a cosmetic change” from a government intent on expansion but “embarrassed” by the glaring lack of social mix.

Comprehensive Future is crowdfunding to finance a legal challenge in the event that any applicant bids, now or in the future, to build an annexe that in effect would be a new grammar school by stealth. But given that schools wishing to expand must prove there is parental demand for more selective places, isn't the campaign seeking to deny them a choice?

“What parents want, I think, is a really good local school where, whatever their child's talents are, they can achieve,” she counters.

“And we now have so much evidence that if you have a high-attaining child, they can do as well in a mixed school, so people that are really denied by selection are those that are rejected.

“If you ask parents at primary school age, ‘Do you want a test that is going to decide whether your child is made to feel a success or a failure?’, which is what it amounts to, you find quite a different response.”

Demoralising narrative

Benn is visibly moved as she recounts watching a mother on the recent BBC documentary series *Grammar Schools: Who Will Get In?* scrimp to pay for a tutor to help her son pass the 11-plus, only for him to miss out.

She also despairs at the government's narrative around selection and its demoralising impact on other schools. For example, school standards minister Nick Gibb recently encouraged grammars to form

multi-academy trusts with neighbouring schools to help raise education standards.

“You select largely better-off children who have had tutoring, who have probably had a favourable home background, you select them and put them in a separate school, you give them more resources and you have no problems about teacher supply and so on – of course they are going to do better than a school down the road where all the children there have been told, at 10, you don’t quite make the cut.

“It isn’t better schools, it’s a sort of educational apartheid.”

She maintains that this is not a “Left, Right” issue, pointing out that many Conservatives are “lukewarm at best” about the policy.

Benn has a new book coming out in September that sets out a vision of a national education service underpinned by the comprehensive ideal. In it, she calls for a five- to 10-year phased transition opening up selective schools to all-ability intakes.

“It would take a bold political party, and a brave and forward-looking one, at this moment in the debate, to say the answer is not to expand this divisive practice, it is to phase it out,” she says. “I recognise there are a lot of people wedded to the selective ideal. I’m not saying it’s going to be easy but I think it could be done and I think it could be done with a national political party that made the case convincingly.”