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The introduction of secondary education for all from the passage of the Education Act 1944 to the establishment of the Labour government in 1945 and the development of its policy for secondary education

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Abstract: *The Education Act of 1944 was a major landmark piece of legislation. It was carefully crafted by the Conservative President of the Board of Education R A Butler, and his Labour junior minister James Chuter Ede to gain maximum support in Parliament and outside it. The Act did not mandate any particular type of secondary reorganisation, although the White Paper that proceeded it did indicate a preference for the selective tripartite system that was eventually adopted by the Labour government elected in 1945.*

*The Act required each local education authority (LEA) to submit a development plan outlining how the authority planned to introduce secondary education for all. As the Act did not specify which type of scheme was to be adopted, LEAs were free to choose their own scheme. Many took the steer from the Norwood report of 1942, the White Paper and the Ministry of Education's Pamphlet No.1, *The Nation's Schools, Their Plan and Purpose*, all of which favoured the tripartite selective system, which was the preferred option of senior officials at the Ministry of Education (as the Board of*

Education had been renamed by the 1944 Act.) But some did not, preferring a non-selective option. Most of these LEAs opted for multilateral schools, with only a small number choosing the American model of large comprehensive schools. However, in the end local choice was not to be. While opinion in the Labour Party was divided, Ministers went for the selective system.

This paper looks at the development of thinking on selective education before the Second World War, examines the development plan proposals of one LEA, Surrey, in some detail and then considers the surveys of almost all LEAs conducted by the Fabian Society and published in two reports produced in 1947 and 1952.

Key words: Multilateral School, Grammar School, Technical School, Modern School, Central School, Upper Elementary School; Butler, Chuter Ede, selection.

It is a common misconception that it was the Education Act of 1944 that introduced the selective tripartite system of secondary education in England. Even the House of Commons Library has fallen for this mistake. [1] While the 1944 Act made the tripartite system possible, it did not specify this or any other form of secondary education. It required local authorities to draw up schemes of secondary education for all and to submit them to the new Ministry of Education for approval, but it allowed local authorities to decide what system of secondary education would be suitable for each local area.

This resulted in an explosion of creativity as county and county borough councils took to their new role with alacrity. They were hemmed in by war-time scarcity and a lack of firm data about secondary education for all, but that did not stop many from adopting plans for creative new systems. What put a stop to this, and led to the adoption of the tripartite system across England and Wales, or in reality in the vast majority of areas a bipartite system of secondary modern and secondary grammar schools, for few secondary technical

schools were ever created, was the post-war Labour government. It was not the Education Act of 1944 that created the selective system, but the Labour government of 1945.

This paper draws on the plans of one major local authority, Surrey, which contained within its then borders (which were larger than the present administrative county) a wide range of different communities from rural to county town and urban areas that are now part of London. This is augmented by a national survey of England and Wales conducted by the Fabian Society, which published two reports on the systems that local authorities had chosen before the Labour government forced all of them to adopt the tripartite (or, in reality, the bipartite) system.

Different views of selection

The issue of selection of children into different types of school had been debated during the 1920s and 1930s. The popular Dalton Plan, for example, “allowed for individualisation of learning in classes with widely differing interests and abilities”. [2] In January 1925 a conference of the Association of Assistant Masters, a secondary teachers association that many years later became part of the present NEU, unanimously called for multilateral schools, which were an early type of comprehensive school which contained different types of provision within the same school. [3]

Yet this ran counter to Board of Education thinking and at a time when intelligence testing was developing, ideas of stratification within schools, or between them, increasingly gained ground. [4] This emphasis on increased stratification was taking place within elementary schools. In the 1920s a few urban local education authorities (LEAs) began to divide elementary education into two halves at the age of 11. Some went for selective central schools for the brighter child from 11 to the school leaving age of 14, while others thought that all children should progress to upper elementary schools after 11.

The Hadow Report of 1926, *The Education of the*

Adolescent, one of three reports that Sir William Hadow produced as chairman of the Board of Education's Consultative Committee, concerned itself with what it called post-primary education. [5] This was not secondary education, which the committee was explicitly prevented from considering by its terms of reference. His report recommended the creation of non-selective senior schools within the elementary school system, for children from 11 to 14 who did not go to secondary school (which the vast majority did not). The debate over selection in the 1930s was over implementing the Hadow Report and whether non-selective senior elementary schools or selective central schools were the way forward. [6]

The issue of secondary education was quite separate. It was available almost entirely only to middle class children whose parents could afford the modest fees that the pre-war grammar schools charged. There were a few scholarship places available free for the bright working class child, but the cost of actually going to a grammar school, rather than out to work, still deterred some who were qualified. Most grammar schools, like most independent schools, were not particularly selective as they provided the only education available for most middle class children. In most cases, if you could afford the modest fees, your child was in.

Just as the Hadow Report of 1926 had advocated non-selective senior elementary schools, so the idea of a single type of secondary school gathered pace, especially among teachers. At this time the most common type of comprehensive school was the multilateral, a common school for all that would be organised into multiple departments of different types.

The Board of Education's Consultative Committee looked at secondary education in the Spens report of 1938. [7] This and the Norwood report of 1942 [8] developed the idea of the tripartite system. At about the age of ten children would take a test (the 11+, similar to the pre-war Scholarship) which would decide whether they went to a secondary grammar school for an academic education, a secondary

technical school for the technically minded or a secondary modern school for the rest. (These had buildings that were usually anything but modern.) There would be a re-assessment at the age of 13 to allow late developers to transfer to grammar schools and, in theory, those who had got into a grammar school but were not up to it to transfer the other way to secondary technical or modern schools. Transfers to grammar school at 13 hardly ever happened. Transfers the other way never did.

Thus by the time of the Education Act 1944 there had been some 30 years of discussion about selection, mainly at upper elementary level, but by the late 1930s and especially the 1940s, at secondary level as well. Yet there was virtually no discussion of selection in the lengthy two-year gestation of the 1944 Act. The Act was the work of the Conservative President of the Board of Education, R A Butler, known universally by his initials as RAB, and his Parliamentary Under Secretary, Labour's James Chuter Ede. Ede played a more significant role than his junior position might at first indicate. He had been a teacher in Epsom, Surrey, and a member of the NUT, before going into politics. He became active in local government, becoming chairman of the Education Committee of the Surrey County Council, even though he was Labour and Surrey was one of the strongest Conservative counties in England. (It was also a county with a strong tradition of liberal education policies.)

The reason why the type of secondary education was not a controversial part of the consultations that led up to the 1944 Act was partly that the Act did not specify what sort of organisation local education authorities (LEAs) had to adopt. That was to be left up to the LEAs. The most contentious issue in the 1944 Act was the role of the churches in education. This was hugely controversial and took up an inordinate amount of time in the couple of years leading up to the Act becoming law. The wartime Coalition set out its plans in the Board of Education's White Paper, *Educational Reconstruction*. It outlined the plans for what became the Education Act 1944 as being the provision of free secondary education for all, the

integration of the voluntary (church) schools more fully into the national system and the streamlining of local administration with the abolition of the Part III authorities introduced by Arthur Balfour's Education Act of 1902. The White Paper hinted at a preferred tripartite system of secondary education, although it recognised the weakness of the advantage that grammar schools had. The White Paper said: "Such, then, will be the three main types of secondary school to be known as grammar, modern and technical schools." But it immediately went on to say, in predictions that never materialised: "It would be wrong to suppose that they will necessarily remain separate and apart. Different types may be combined in one building" - in effect, multilateral schools - "or on one site as considerations of convenience and efficiency may suggest. In any case the free interchange of pupils from one type of education to another must be facilitated." [9] This section, and any mention of the type of school that should be adopted, was removed from the wording of the Act, which did not prescribe which sort of provision LEAs should make.

It was not really much of an issue at this time. For example, there is not a single mention of selection, comprehensive education or multilateral schools in Ede's war-time diaries [10] and there was no mention of the type of secondary education to be adopted in the Conservative Party's education policy report of 1942. [11]

What the Education Act 1944 required

Under Section 11 of the Education Act 1944 every LEA was required to prepare as soon as possible after 1 April 1945 a development plan, which was to be submitted to the Minister for Education by 1 April 1946. (The Education Act 1944 applied to England and Wales. There was a separate Act, the Education (Scotland) Act 1945, that applied to Scotland. The Scottish Act was similar to that covering England and Wales, but this paper covers only the English and Welsh act.) The development plan was to contain the proposals of the LEA for the future organisation of primary and secondary education

within its area. This included provision for nursery schools, special schools and boarding schools, but excluded further education which was covered by Section 42 of the Act which allowed the Minister to require LEAs to prepare further education schemes.

The development plans were to cover both county and voluntary schools and schools not maintained by the LEA where that was relevant to the scheme. The governors, managers (as primary school governors were then called) and church authorities had to be consulted. Divisional Executives, which under the Act had replaced the Part III Authorities, also had to be consulted. Under Section 8 primary and secondary education had to be provided in separate schools. As the Hadow reforms of 1926 had not been implemented everywhere, and many children were still educated in all-age elementary schools, this gave most LEAs a real problem, especially as building materials to build new schools or repair ones that had been bombed during the war were in short supply. Section 11 of the Act therefore allowed unreorganised all-age elementary schools, catering for children from the beginning to the end of compulsory schooling, to continue “for a limited period where necessary”. That limited period lasted 20 years, with the last elementary schools reorganised in the 1960s. The development plans also had to show what new buildings and alterations to buildings would be required for every school and what special transport arrangements would be necessary. At no point does the Act specify what type of secondary provision a local authority should make in its development plan.

The development plans were then submitted to the Minister of Education who considered them in detail. Senior councillors would meet with the Education Minister and his senior officials to explain why their plan proposed what it did. The plans were detailed and so were the discussions with the Ministry. Once the Education Minister was satisfied with the plan it was incorporated into a Local Education Order which was to be made by the Minister and which could then only be changed by the Minister or by Parliament. As a report from

the Education Committee to the full meeting of Surrey County Council on 24 April 1945 explained: “The effect of this will be that each authority will have before it a detailed programme of development for its areas which it is obliged by statutory authority to fulfil.” [12]

Surrey County Council

Surrey is a good LEA to take as an example. It was a large county with most types of community to be found within it. In the west of the county it was rural, with small towns and villages. In the east it was heavily built-up and urban in an area that was transferred to London in 1965. In the middle were county towns like Guildford and Woking. A strong Conservative county, it had at that time a lot of independent councillors. One of its aldermen was James Chuter Ede, who had remained an active member of the council throughout his time as the junior minister at the Board of Education. It is reasonable to assume that, as a former chairman of the Surrey education committee, he would have had considerable influence on policy which would have reflected his and Butler’s views on how the 1944 Act should be implemented.

What stands out from a study of the papers of the Surrey education committee in 1945 is just how widespread the impact of the 1944 Act was, and the enthusiasm and imagination with which local government rose to the challenge. Like all other LEAs, secondary reorganisation was only one of a large number of other issues that the education committee had to grapple with. The county was still carrying through the reorganisation of elementary education that had followed the Hadow Report of 1926. The administrative structure of education had to be reorganised following the abolition of Part III authorities that the 1944 Act had brought about. There were unending discussions with the churches whose role had been such a contentious part of the 1944 Act. Changes to approved schools, remand homes, libraries, the Child Guidance Service, free medical provision for children (this was still three years before the NHS was formed), evacuated school children, further education and higher

education all had to be considered, and plans made for the raising of the school leaving age to 15. At the same time there was a chronic shortage of building materials at a time when a number of schools (and, indeed, the County Hall itself) that had been bombed in the war had to be repaired or rebuilt and new places created for the raising of the school leaving age.

The reorganisation that followed the Act was complicated by the patchwork of provision that already existed. Some parts of Surrey had been reorganised after the Hadow report of 1926, with the creation of central schools for children aged 11 to 14, but other parts of the county had not. Anglican and Catholic church schools also complicated the picture, as the diocesan authorities and individual governors and managers all had to be consulted.

When it came to secondary education, Surrey was one of those authorities that had not been convinced by the proposals of the Norwood report for a selective tripartite system. As the County's Chief Education Officer, R Beloe, made clear in a memorandum presented to the Education Committee, which endorsed it, and then to the full council in 1945 [13]: "The Norwood Report has its critics." [14] Beloe was clearly one of them. As he explained, among its shortcomings was the view that the brightest pupils would go only to one type of school, the grammar school. "It also lumps together into a school, euphemistically called 'Modern', all sorts and kinds of children who do not get into the grammar or technical school. Many who desire to see equality of opportunity given to each child to develop his talents (which surely is the essential if each child's ability and aptitude are to be studied) fear that the Modern School will be treated as was the Central or Senior School and that there will still be more than one system of education provided by local education authorities for senior pupils." [15]

Beloe's memorandum went on: "A further error, into which the writer believes the Norwood Committee have fallen, is to believe that the normal age for selecting a type of school for a child should be 11." [16] Beloe proved to be far-sighted. Seventy years later research from the OECD found

that at 10 or 11, tests like the 11+ do not test academic ability but only social background. [17] Intelligence tests only test academic ability at a later age, and the later the tests are administered the more accurate the results. [18]

Beloe outlined the advantages and disadvantages of the tripartite and multilateral options, including the type of multilateral that in the USA was called a comprehensive. Like many others in England at that time, Beloe feared that comprehensives would have to be very large, quoting the London County Council whose plan was for comprehensives of up to 2,000 pupils each. The London County Council estimated that a comprehensive school of 500 pupils would have a sixth form of under 20. [19] While schools with 2,000 pupils were common in the USA, few in Britain wanted to see schools that large in the UK. Beloe did not believe that comprehensive schools did have to be that large, but at a time when very few people stayed on in school until they were 18 the fear of the necessity to have very large comprehensives limited their attractiveness in the minds of many people.

Beloe preferred the multilateral approach, accepting that the different types of education outlined in the Norwood report (and others) should be available to all children in the county but whether it was grammar, technical or commercial courses, "these courses should not necessarily constitute the only courses in one school." [20] While the Norwood committee had identified three types of school (grammar, technical and modern) Beloe identified at least 12 (academic, engineering, art, building, agricultural, secretarial, horticultural, dressmaking, distributive trades, homemaking and nursing). [21] Beloe envisaged these not as separate schools, but as courses available in different sides of a multilateral school. Not all multilaterals would include all sides. Some schools would be grouped together so that between them they could cover courses in all areas.

Beloe proved far sighted. He recognised that Surrey could not possibly provide enough grammar schools for all those qualified for an academic education. As his memo noted: "The grammar schools themselves provide enough

places for about 15 per cent of the children qualified by age to enter.” [22] There were far more than 15% of children in Surrey capable of an academic education. A later estimate put the figure at 40%. He also recognised that 10 (the age at which most children sat the 11+) was far too young to accurately measure a child’s academic ability. His memo stated: “It is submitted that an attempt to choose a school, even for the majority, at the age of 11 is open to grave possibilities of error and prejudicial to the best choice being made.” He therefore recommended that all secondary schools should follow the same curriculum from entry to age 13, with selection onto different courses made at that later age. [23]

Beloe was also concerned that the tripartite system would lead to a hierarchy of schools, with the grammar schools seen as the most prestigious with the best teachers, facilities and buildings. As his memo stated: “Hitherto grammar schools have received preferential treatment in staffing, in equipment and in amenities” including the pay of teachers, and if grammar schools were to remain this was bound to continue. He did not think that there should be supremacy of any type of school. [24]

All the multilateral schools would follow the same courses for children from age 11 to 13, with 13 the age at which a choice would be made as to which side of the multilateral each child should follow. Provision for these children would be in what Beloe called the lower school of each multilateral school. The senior school would be for children above 13 years-old and would be where courses from a number of Beloe’s 12 different sides of a multilateral school would be provided. If a particular school did not have the specialism that the child needed then the child could transfer to another Senior School which did.

The Education Committee, and later the County Council, adopted Beloe’s ideas for multilateral comprehensives for Surrey’s future secondary education. It is worth noting that these decisions were not being made by a radical socialist inner-city LEA, but by a very Conservative county council whose members were largely wealthy upper

middle class people who could afford the time to devote to county government. This was decades before local authorities could pay councillors for their time. The County Education Officer had been a pupil and later a teacher at Eton. These people were not revolutionaries. They were largely paternalistic Tories who wanted to do the best for the children of Surrey in a pragmatic and non-ideological way.

The Labour government elected in 1945

If the organisation of comprehensive education was largely a practical issue for Conservatives, it was sharper and more divisive in the Labour Party. Many saw the new grammar schools as more egalitarian, while some on the left favoured the multilaterals and a few even supported the American style comprehensives. Some argued that multilaterals and comprehensives would be more expensive, at a time of great postwar austerity, as they would require more new buildings while a selective system could more easily be fitted into the existing school building stock. There was also the problem of school size with multilaterals and even more with the American style comprehensives. When London County Council announced its plans for multilaterals they included schools of between 1,250 and 2,000 pupils. The average for most authorities that went down this route was 500 to 600 pupils. [25]

While there were differences of view within Labour about how secondary education should be organised, this was still a relatively minor issue. It was hardly raised during the passage of the Education Bill through Parliament. Butler and Ede went to great lengths to ensure that the Bill appealed to moderate opinion in both the Conservative and Labour parties, and that both party leaders supported the Bill. The Times noted that in a two-day debate on the White Paper that had preceded the Bill “not a single voice was raised in favour of holding up or whittling down any of the proposals for educational advance.” [26]

Despite the best efforts and parliamentary skill of RAB and Chuter Ede, the Education Bill did explode in controversy,

but over an issue that ministers had not seen coming. In March 1944 the government was defeated by one vote – 117 to 116 – when the Conservative MP for Islington East and feminist Mrs Thelma Cazalet-Keir moved an amendment that would have put on the face of the Bill a requirement for equal pay for women teachers. There had long been support for this within Labour, but Attlee was outraged, as was Churchill, and insisted that the matter be made a vote of confidence in the government. The matter was put to the vote again the following day when the amendment was defeated. Attlee complained of “a culmination of a course of irresponsible conduct pursued by certain Members of the House.” [27] The row did Cazalet-Keir no long-term harm. She replaced James Chuter Ede as Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Education in the caretaker National government that followed Labour’s withdrawal from the war time coalition, until losing her seat in the 1945 election.

While the type of secondary education was not much of an issue for the parliamentary party, it was more of an issue for some activists. At the Labour Party conference of 1944, held in December at the Westminster Central Hall in London, the education debate was on the Education Act passed earlier that year. The motion debated criticised the Act for not raising the school leaving age to 16, rather than 15, and for some of the financial provisions which the mover of the motion felt would act against poorer children. There was no mention of the organisation of secondary education. [28]

Labour’s 1945 conference was held only five months later, in Blackpool. The education debate was again on the Education Act. In a six-part motion, clause (c) called for “newly-built secondary schools to be of the multi-lateral type wherever possible.” This, of course, did not preclude exiting grammar schools from continuing alongside the multilateral schools, making them little different from secondary moderns. During the debate nobody spoke on clause (c). [29]

By the time of the 1946 Labour conference, held in Bournemouth, Attlee had won his crushing victory in the 1945 election and Labour was in power. The education debate

started with the Minister of Education, Ellen Wilkinson MP, outlining what the Labour government was doing to implement the 1944 Act. There had been criticism of a pamphlet called *The Nation's Schools, Their Plan and Purpose*, issued by the Ministry of Education as its Pamphlet No.1. This set out the arrangements for the tripartite system of secondary grammar, technical and modern schools, and reflected the orthodox thinking of officials at the Ministry of Education. This caused an outcry from Labour activists who forced Ellen Wilkinson, who had actually written much of it although she pretended to the conference that it was nothing to do with her, telling them that it had been produced "before I became Minister" [30], to withdraw the document. However, its contents were remarkably similar to *The New Secondary Education*, Ministry of Education Pamphlet No.9, which the Ministry published in 1947. The pamphlet was written by Ellen Wilkinson before she died, and was published by her successor, George Tomlinson MP, who acknowledged her role in writing it.

The National Association of Labour Teachers favoured multilaterals, but in her speech to conference Wilkinson attacked them for being mistaken about what Labour policy was. She said: "I know the point that the Labour teachers had in mind, and that, too, is based on a misconception. When we talk about three types of Secondary Schools they think that they are going to be, first, second and third class secondary schools. I do want to assure this audience that whatever may have been in the mind of the framer of the 1944 Bill, that is not in my mind as an administrator of the Act." It may not have been in Wilkinson's mind, but as we now know, that is exactly what happened. Those Labour activists that opposed the tripartite system, criticising it as, in the words of J W Raisin of the East Lewisham District Labour Party, being the "separating of the sheep from the goats" that had been a feature of the pre-1944 Act system were proved right. [31] W E Cove MP, of the National Association of Labour Teachers, moved a motion attacking the pamphlet *The Nation's Schools* as being the model that many local education authorities had

followed and called upon Wilkinson to withdraw it and to “reshape educational policy in accordance with socialist principals.” Despite opposition from Wilkinson and an attempt by the conference chairman to persuade Cove to withdraw his motion, he insisted on a vote. The Teachers’ Association motion was carried. [32]

The 1948 Labour party conference was held in Scarborough. Mrs Edna Harrison of the Derbyshire North East District Labour Party moved a motion that: “This conference affirms the principle of the common Secondary School for all, up to the age of 16”. But she was followed by a composite motion moved by Mr T P Riley of Walsall which, in its many parts, did not mention selection or the common school at all. Mrs Harrison had her supporters, but we will never know how many they were as when it came to a vote the chairman suggested that the motions that had been proposed should be remitted to the National Executive for further consideration. And so they were, so there was no vote that might have embarrassed the party leadership. [33]

Despite opposition from the National Association of Labour Teachers and some constituency activists, Attlee, Ellen Wilkinson and the Parliamentary Labour Party had made up their mind and adopted and enforced the tripartite selective system. The orthodoxy of Ministry of Education officials had triumphed, and the Ministry even published a letter advising all LEAs that the secondary moderns were meant for working class children. Those LEAs, Conservative and Labour, that wanted to go comprehensive (mainly with multilateral schools) were stopped from doing so and forced to adopt selection. The negative consequences of this still impacts the education of children in about 20% of England where selective schools remain.

The Fabian Society surveys of local authority plans

In accordance with the 1944 Act, LEAs began filing their development plans with the new Ministry of Education. Joan Thompson of the Fabian Society kept tabs on them. By 1947 she had a sample of 53 LEAs and reported a considerable

Table 1. Types of secondary schools in the development plans, 1947 report

Type of school	Schools	Pupils
Grammar	17.0%	12.0%
Technical	7.0%	6.0%
Modern	50.0%	41.0%
Grammar-technical	2.0%	1.5%
Technical-modern	11.0%	10.0%
Grammar-modern	1.0%	1.0%
Multilateral	10.0%	26.5%

Source: *Secondary Education for All*, Joan Thompson, the Fabian Society, April 1947.

variety of plans. [34] As well as the three types of school outlined in the tripartite system, councils also went for combinations whether multilateral or bilateral. The bilateralschools had either grammar and technical streams, grammar and modern or technical and modern streams. Among these various alternatives 10% of schools were multilaterals accounting for 26.5% of pupils. Grammar schools accounted for 17% of schools and 12% of pupils. Secondary moderns were the largest category, with 50% of schools and 41% of pupils. [35]

On the basis of Joan Thompson's survey of 53 LEAs, comprehensive/multilateral schools would have provided for over a quarter of pupils, although the second updated report of 1952 halved this number.

The Fabian Society published this second report in

January 1952 [36], a few weeks after Labour lost the general election of 1951. This surveyed the development plans of 111 of the 146 LEAs then in existence in England and Wales. Of these, 45 were county councils (including London) and 66 came from county boroughs. While this represented 75% of LEAs, they accounted for 2,400,000 school places out of 2,500,000 total school places available. (These figures –assumed the raising of the school leaving age to 16, which would not happen for another two decades, but this distortion would have affected all LEAs equally.)

While the plans outlined the ambitions of the LEAs, the reality was different. Post-war shortages meant that it was impossible to carry out the plans quickly. Thompson estimated that it would take 80 years to have delivered the plans. Change was therefore a lot slower than many had originally hoped.

In the 1952 report the Fabian Society stated that there had been 14 comprehensive or multilateral schools in existence in 1946, catering for 11,000 pupils, and 31 bilateral schools with 13,000 pupils. The report went on the claim that “apart from these the structure of secondary education remains much the same as the post-primary education before 1944 ... The pre-1944 secondary schools have been renamed Secondary Grammar Schools, and entry to them is still regulated by a test taken between the ages of 10 and 12 ... The provision for children who are not successful in this test differs in the different areas. Seventeen percent stay on in all-age schools, mostly in the country districts, and in voluntary schools where there has been difficulty about raising the capital for the new school building. Otherwise the children mostly go to Modern Secondary schools previously known as Senior Schools. A few LEAs have an alternative in the form of the secondary schools which used to be called Central Schools ... These schools are mostly in the large towns, as are the 300 Junior Technical Schools, now known as Secondary Technical Schools, entry to which is still mostly at the age of 13. In towns which have these commercial and technical schools the most able children are skimmed off three times leaving the

rest of the children in the modern schools.” The report noted the many ways in which grammar schools were better resourced than modern schools. “The grammar schools usually have a great many advantages such as well-equipped libraries, laboratories and gymnasia, spacious premises and playing fields which often do not exist in the older Modern schools”. The report went on: “Many LEAs are themselves responsible for discrimination between the different kinds of secondary schools by means of grants for school equipment and educational materials, which are usually, without sufficient reason, greater for the Grammar schools than for the Modern schools.” [37] Before the 1944 Act the Senior and Central Schools referred to were upper elementary schools giving advanced primary education, not secondary schools.

An analysis of the 111 development plans showed a difference between the counties and the county boroughs, which partly reflected the rural nature of many counties. “More County Boroughs than Counties are going to use Grammar, Technical and Modern schools exclusively, possibly because this tripartite division fits their existing schools for children of over 11 most easily. In the more sparsely populated Counties where reorganisation of education for those over 11 had not taken place, the field is clearer for a new organisation of secondary education. Also the provision of separate schools in the most thinly populated districts would mean that these schools would have to be very small.” A breakdown of the different types of school is given in table 2 below. [38]

Note that by 1952 the term ‘comprehensive’ had replaced the term ‘multilateral’ used in 1947. Also note that the report was based on the development plans that had to be submitted by 1946, and did not reflect the situation that existed in 1952. The Fabian Society had obtained more development plans by 1951, with which to update its 1947 report. It did not claim that the data referred to 1952.

Conclusion

The two years spent consulting on the Education Act 1944

coincided with the turning of the tide of war. As victory and an eventual end to the war became increasingly likely, so enthusiasm for planning for a peace that would bring a better life for people increased. There was growing debate about reconstruction, as building the post war world was called.

The skill of R A Butler and James Chuter Ede in piloting the Education Bill through Parliament without any serious opposition smoothed the passage of the Bill, so that when it became the Education Act of 1944 there was tremendous enthusiasm for it. The Act covered a lot of ground, but did not specify what form secondary education should take. In reality it was the culmination of half a century of debate about the

Table 2. Types of secondary schools in the development plans, 1952 report

Type of school	Schools	Pupils
Grammar	15.0%	13.0%
Technical	7.0%	7.5%
Modern	58.0%	51.0%
Grammar-technical	2.5%	2.5%
Technical-modern	8.5%	8.5%
Grammar-modern	2.0%	2.0%
Comprehensive	5.5%	12.5%

Source: *Secondary Education Survey*, Joan Thompson, the Fabian Society, January 1952.

future of education, and about selection. The call for development plans was taken up enthusiastically by LEAs. Then after the war the enthusiasm ran into the buffers of reality. There were shortages everywhere. Rationing was actually tougher after the war than during it. There was intense competition for building material, and the country faced huge economic problems. In 1950 the country was back at war, in Korea, and rearmament became the main priority. The result was that actual reform was a lot slower than everyone wanted.

The debate over selection was fought out mainly in the Labour Party. The selective tripartite system had been supported by the Spens and Norwood reports and became the orthodoxy of Ministry of Education senior officials. Butler favoured allowing those LEAs who wanted to go comprehensive to do so. [39] But by 1945 he was out of office.

Labour ministers in the new government favoured selection and the tripartite system, and that is what they imposed across the whole of England and Wales. (The situation in Scotland was different. Outside the four main cities the largely rural areas lent themselves more to comprehensives, which sat well with the more egalitarian Scottish society. Most of Scotland soon went comprehensive. The situation was different again in Northern Ireland, where educational organisation was complicated by the religious/political divide. It remained selective, although most grammar schools took in the majority of pupils in their area. In effect, it was the lowest achieving pupils who were selected out into what in Great Britain were called secondary moderns, although that was not a term used in Northern Ireland.)

As the Fabian Society's 1952 report showed, a lot of LEAs, including many Labour ones, supported selection. The reasons for this included the practical one that the existing school buildings lent themselves more to the tripartite system than comprehensives, which would have required more new building, and a fear of what was thought to be the

necessity for very large schools to get a decent sized sixth form from a comprehensive school. There was also the pull of tradition. Grammar schools had performed well for the few who went to them, and many Labour (and Conservative) boroughs were reluctant to sweep them away for the untried comprehensives. The result was that secondary education for all was achieved by adapting the pre-war system of Senior Elementary Schools and Central Schools, which had been about senior primary education and not secondary education. In many areas these became the secondary moderns. They had not been designed as secondary schools and lacked the amenities of the grammar schools which had.

Perhaps the slow rate of reform should not be a surprise. The Hadow reforms of 1926, which were a lot simpler than the reforms of the 1944 Act, had still not been implemented twenty years later in many areas, including in wealthy Conservative counties. Yet some of those involved in the debate from 1944 to 1946 proved far sighted. Whether it was Conservative Surrey or Labour London County Councils, or the National Association of Labour Teachers, their fears proved justified but the opportunity was lost by the determination of Clement Attlee and Ellen Wilkinson to impose the tripartite system. Comprehensive education in England and Wales was delayed by about thirty years.

The report that the Chief Education Officer of Surrey County Council, Mr R Beloe, put before his Education Committee in 1945, was a remarkable document. It was prescient about the problems of the selective system Surrey was eventually forced to adopt, and imaginative about how a multilateral system could be adapted for the benefit of all children in Surrey. Some 20 years later Surrey adopted a different comprehensive system more suited to the time. As a report from Surrey's chief inspector in the early 1970s, Mrs Joan Dean, showed, the comprehensive reforms of secondary schools and the Plowden reforms of primary schools resulted in a higher standard of education across the whole system, from screening of 7 year-olds, through increased GCE O and A level results to Oxbridge entry. These improvements followed

exactly the roll out of the reforms, from west to east, across the county.

There were many other LEAs, both Conservative and Labour, who had similarly far-sighted officers who wrote their own version of the Beloe report and councillors who supported them. Yet reform proceeded at a snail's pace until the election of a Labour government committed to comprehensive reform in 1964. Yet it was under Margaret Thatcher, who was Education Secretary from 1970 to 1974, that England finally had a majority of its secondary education in comprehensive schools. This most Conservative of politicians remains to this day the Education Secretary who closed more grammar schools and opened more comprehensives than any other. [40]

Foot notes

[1] Shadi Danechi, (3 January 2020,) *Grammar School Statistics*, House of Commons Library Briefing Paper No. 1398. This, and other House of Commons research briefings, claims that the tripartite system was introduced by the Education Act 1944. While the Act did make tripartite reorganisations possible, it did not mandate them or any other type of secondary reorganisation.

[2] Brian Simon (1974), *The Politics of Educational Reform 1920-1940*, Lawrence and Wishart, London, part of the Studies in the History of Education series, page 239. For more detail of the plan see also A J Lynch (1924), *Individual Work and the Dalton Plan*, and C W Kimmins and Belle Rennie (1932), *The Triumph of the Dalton Plan*.

[3] Simon, page 141.

[4] Coryton, Demitri (2023), 'The Development of selective and comprehensive education in England', in *Education Journal* No. 511, 25 January 2023.

[5] *The Education of the Adolescent* (1926), report of the Board of Education Consultative Committee under the chairmanship of Sir William Hadow, published by His Majesty's Stationery Office.

[6] See, for example, 'Selective Central or Senior Schools', in *The Year Book of Education 1933*, edited by Lord Eustace Percy MP, former President of the Board of Education, published by Evans Brothers, London, page 190.

[7] *Report of the Board of Education Consultative Committee on Secondary Education with Special Reference to Grammar Schools and Technical High Schools* (1938) under the chairmanship of Will Spens, (the Spens report) published by His Majesty's Stationery Office.

[8] *Curriculum and Examinations in Secondary Schools* (1942). Report of the Committee of the Secondary Schools Examination Council under the chairmanship of Sir Cyril Norwood (the Norwood report), published by His Majesty's Stationery Office.

[9] *Educational Reconstruction* (1943), Board of Education White Paper, Cmd. 6458, page 10.

[10] Chuter Ede, James (1987), *Labour and the Wartime Coalition. From the Diary of James Chuter Ede, 1941 - 1945*, edited by Kevin Jefferys, published by The Historian's Press.

[11] *Looking Ahead. Educational Aims, Being the First Interim Report of the Conservative Sub-Committee on Education* (1942), published by the Central Committee on Post-War Reconstruction set up by the Conservative and Unionist Party Organisation, September 1942.

[12] *Surrey. Reports to be presented to the County Council, 24 April 1945, (The Yellow Book, April 1945)* published by Surrey County Council) (1945), report of the Surrey Education

Committee, paragraph C 1, page 187. (The *Yellow Books* were the agenda and committee reports presented at each meeting of the full county council, so called because the front cover was yellow.)

[13] *Surrey. Reports to be Presented to the County Council, 30th October 1945. Surrey County Council Yellow Book (1945). Report of the Education Committee, Appendix 2, "Development Plan: Organisation of Secondary Education in the 'Reorganised' parts of the county."* Memorandum from the Chief Education Officer, R Beloe, 19 September 1945, from page 655. (The reference to unreorganised areas referred to the reorganisation that followed the Hadow report of 1926.)

[14] *Ibid.*, paragraph F, page 661.

[15] *Ibid.*, paragraph F, page 662.

[16] *Ibid.*, paragraph F, page 662.

[17] *Programme for International Student Assessment Results 2018 (2019), Volume 1, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, Paris.*

[18] Schleicher, Professor Andreas (2022), Director of Education and Skills, OECD, "Selective education is not the way forward", in *Education Journal* No. 507, 30 November 2022.

[19] Thompson, Joan (1952), *Secondary Education Survey. An Analysis of LEA Development Plans for Secondary Education*, The Fabian Society Research Series pamphlet No. 148, published by Fabian Publications Ltd with Victor Gollancz Ltd., page 16.

[20] *Surrey County Council Yellow Book (1945). Reports to be Presented to the County Council, 30th October 1945. Report of the Education Committee, Appendix 2,*

“Development Plan: Organisation of Secondary Education in the ‘Reorganised’ parts of the county.” Paragraph 10 (b), page 222, 18 January 1945.

[21] Ibid., paragraph G (2), page 665.

[22] Ibid., paragraph B (1), page 656.

[23] Ibid., paragraph F (3), page 664.

[24] Ibid., paragraph F (1), page 662.

[25] Joan Thompson (1947), *Secondary Education for All. An Analysis of Local Education Authorities’ Development Plans*, the Fabian Society Research Series pamphlet No. 118, published by Fabian Publications Ltd with Victor Gollancz Ltd.

[26] Quoted in Kenneth Harris (1982), *Attlee*, George Weidenfeld and Nicholson Ltd., London, page 227.

[27] Ibid., page 227.

[28] *Report of the Forty-third Annual Conference of The Labour Party, London, 1944* (1944). The report on the education debate started on page 182.

[29] *Report of the Forty-fourth Annual Conference of The Labour Party, Blackpool, 1945* (1945). The report on the education debate started on page 126.

[30] *Report of the Forty-fifth Annual Conference of The Labour Party, Bournemouth, 1946* (1946), page 189. The report on the education debate started on page 189.

[31] Ibid., page 191.

[32] Ibid., page 195.

[33] *Report of the Forty-seventh Annual Conference of the Labour Party, Scarborough, 1948*, (1948), the Labour Party. The report on the education debate starts on page 153.

[34] Joan Thompson (1947), *Secondary Education for All. An Analysis of Local Education Authorities' Development Plans*, the Fabian Society Research Series pamphlet No. 118, published by Fabian Publications Ltd with Victor Gollancz Ltd.

[35] *Ibid.*, page 8.

[36] *Ibid.*

[37] *Ibid.*, pages 5 and 6.

[38] *Ibid.* The quotes and the table are on page 8.

[39] Conversation between R A Butler and the author, then chairman of the Conservative National Advisory Committee on Education, 1980. There is also a news reel interview with Butler, probably from British Pathé, from the late 1940s saying the same thing. This was confirmed by a conversation between the author and Butler's widow, Lady Molly Butler, then a vice president of the Conservative Education Association, over tea at the Carlton Club a few years later.

[40] As the *Conservative Campaign Guide 1974*, published by Conservative Central Office for the February 1974 general election, stated, Margaret Thatcher approved 91% of the 3,600 comprehensive reorganisation proposals put before her, refusing only 325. The *Campaign Guide* could have added that these 325 schemes were poor ones that HMI recommended should be refused.