

From bastion of class privilege to public benefactor: the remarkable repositioning of private schools

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This chapter examines the apparent transformation of private schooling from ‘the strongest remaining bastion of class privilege’ (Crosland 1956: 261) to ‘meritocratic powerhouse’ (Peel 2015). Private schooling has long had a troubled place in the politics of education in England. As Adonis and Pollard (1998: 37) argue, England has been unusual in the extent to which its school system ‘segregates the most socially advantaged’.¹ The most elite private schools – confusingly also called ‘public schools’ – have long been associated with social exclusivity and privileged access to positions of power and influence. In general, private schools have most often been seen as maintaining social *immobility*, particularly at the highest social levels. In recent years, however, private schools have been repositioned as a significant contributor to social *mobility*. Similarly, the contention that private schools *diminish* their neighbouring state-maintained schools is now being replaced by claims that they *benefit* their neighbours by sharing amenities and offering expertise. In this chapter, we explore this remarkable repositioning.

The chapter begins by presenting those accounts of private schooling that draw attention to its exclusivity and long association with elite formation. It then goes on to examine political challenges to the private sector – challenges that have tended to take two paths. One path, championed by those on the left, has been about weakening (even abolishing) the private sector. The other path, and the one which has prevailed, focuses on maintaining the private sector, but reducing its exclusivity

¹ While private schools also exist in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, they are far less numerous and do not enjoy the prestige or power of their English counterparts. Nor have they have been repositioned in the same way as in England. Similarly in many countries, private schools are less exclusive and less expensive as they are largely used to cater for parents seeking faith-based education outside secular state provision or to provide support for students who are having difficulties in state-maintained provision.

through widening access. More recently, private schools have also been encouraged to ‘partner’ state-maintained schools or even transform themselves into academies. Far from weakening state education, private schools are now seen to offer the best way of improving the education system as a whole. We then consider the evidence of the relative success of these schemes before discussing whether the remarkable repositioning of private schools is justified.

The ‘problem’ of private schools

Private education as bastion of class privilege

In England, the ‘engine’ of private schooling has been strongly associated with the reproduction of the class system. In Victorian England, the 1864 Clarendon Inquiry into the nine ‘great’ Public Schools described their function as developing their pupils’ ‘capacity to govern others and control themselves’ (quoted in Berghoff 1990: 148). At that exalted level, schooling strengthened the sense of status group membership among those ‘born’ to lead. As the needs of an expanding Empire demanded increasing numbers in public administration, the professions and management, the established private schools increased their numbers and many new ones were created. However, these schools were not seen as an engine of meritocracy. It was still largely assumed that schooling would return pupils to the social levels from which they had come. This assumption was made explicit in the School Inquiry Commission’s (1868) grading of secondary education, by content and duration and outcome, for three distinct categories of pupils corresponding ‘if by no means exactly to gradations in society’. Entry to third grade schools might extend down to the sons of ‘superior artisans’, but was mainly for the sons of the middle class. Schools in the second grade provided for the sons of ‘the larger shopkeepers, rising men of business and the larger tenant farmers’. Those schools in the first grade recruited from ‘men of considerable income independent of their own exertions’, though they also accepted the socially appropriate aspirations of those among the ‘poorer

gentry' and the gentlemanly professions whose own 'cultivation' led them to 'look to education to keep their sons on a high social level'.²

One hundred years later, the relationship between social advantage and private education appeared to have remained largely unchanged.³ In 1968, the Public Schools Commission (PSC) reported on private schools' 'association with particular classes' from which the working-class was largely excluded. It commented in particular on the social selectiveness of the Public Schools, which it estimated took two-thirds of their pupils from the upper middle-class and only just over a quarter from the lower middle-class. The Commission cited the schools' own admission that 'only the better-off can afford to send their sons to us, and our parents therefore nearly all come from the upper income brackets and follow the occupations normal to those in those brackets' (PSC 1970: 55).

The Post-War challenge

Established in 1965, the Public Schools Commission was itself a response by the Labour Party to address the 'problem' of private education in general and the enduring dominance of the Public Schools in particular. The end of the Second World War had marked the beginning of a drive towards a 'fairer' Britain and the 1940s witnessed the emergence of a range of social welfare programmes, including the National Health Service, and free secondary education for all. Although the 'market share' of private schools declined slightly in the Post-War years (Edwards *et al.* 1989), the private sector had retained its social and occupational significance. It remained what R. A. Butler (1971: 120) referred to as the 'first class carriage' of the educational train.

2 The association between the Public Schools and social class origins and destinations was, of course, highly gendered. The primary function of most boarding schools for girls founded in Victorian England was preparation for a 'suitable' marriage through the acquisition or reinforcement of cultural capital rather than training for the professional or other high-status employment largely reserved for males.

3 A significant change was of course the increasing provision for girls which was not in the 'finishing school tradition' (Okeley 1978) of the Victorian girls' schools. In particular, day schools for girls provided less of a 'class privilege of daughters of the bourgeoisie compared with the men of that social class' (Arnot 2002: 138).

At various points in the succeeding decades there were attempts to abolish private schools entirely. The Labour Party and the Trades Unions Congress made the case for abolition to the Fleming Committee (1944), the report of which laid the foundations for the 1944 Education Act. Motions to abolish private schools were also put forward at the Labour Party Conferences of 1953 and 1958 and were only narrowly defeated. The 1964 Election Manifesto promised the 'integration' of private schooling into the state system, though without any clarity about how this was to be done. In the 1970s, Neil Kinnock, then Shadow Education Secretary, argued that the Public Schools 'have been, are, and, for as long as they exist, will continue to be, an incubus on freedom, opportunity and justice in our society'. He promised to use all the influence he could muster within the Labour Party 'to secure a policy position which will bring about the abolition of the private schools and other forms of private education' (cited in Peel 2015: 11)

As Walford (1990) points out, the Labour Party's position on private schools has been much stronger in opposition than when in power. There are a number of reasons why this may be so. Even though Tony Crosland had described private schooling as 'the greatest single cause of stratification and class consciousness in Britain' (1962: 194), in power as Education Secretary, he dismissed abolition as being both unacceptable on libertarian grounds and unenforceable in practice. However, others have argued that the Labour Party's reluctance to abolish private schools is less to do with matters of principle or practice but rather more to do with their own personal allegiances and interests. For example, Dianne Abbott chose to send her son in 2003 to an elite private boys' school rather than any of the local comprehensive schools in Hackney – one of the most deprived areas in the country. When challenged, she commented 'I suppose the principled thing to do would have been to send my son to a failing state school, however bad it was, but I'm sorry I just don't possess that level of principle' (Lusher 2003). Jeremy Corbyn, the current leader of the Labour Party, cannot be accused of similar double standards – having allegedly separated from his wife because he could not accept her decision to send their son to an elite London grammar school (Randall 1999). Nevertheless there are those

who see his relative lack of ambition on the issue of private education as being out of step with his other left-wing policies and wonder whether this might be connected with his own educational background and those of his advisors. Verkaik (2017), for instance, points to the fact that Corbyn attended a private ‘prep’ school and what he calls a ‘faux public school’, while two of his closest advisors went to Winchester College, one of the country’s ‘top’ public schools. Similarly, Lott (2017) claims that Corbyn’s shadow cabinet has ‘too many people with too many fingers in the private-schooling pie’ to make a serious challenge on the private sector.

For the most part, the current challenge to the continued existence of the private school sector comes from small pressure groups rather than any of the main political parties. The Campaign for State Education, for example, remains ‘opposed to a private school system which enables wealthy parents to purchase social and economic advantages for their children’ (CASE 2014). However, even their manifesto for change falls far short of calls for abolition. Instead, CASE wants the Government to develop policies for promoting state schooling. In a similar vein to other calls from the Left, it asks only that private schools should lose their charitable status. It also proposes that: ‘In the longer term, the finances of private schools should be restricted in law to the same level as that provided in the public sector’ – presumably in the hope that these schools will gradually lose their appeal.

It would appear then that there is no longer any significant threat to the continued existence of the private sector. Indeed, Peel’s (2015) celebratory account of the recent history of private education from 1979 to 2015 opens with a chapter announcing ‘The Curse is Lifted’. This does not mean, though, that the ‘problem’ of what to do with private schools has disappeared, but rather that it has been mainly addressed through calls to change its relationship with the state-maintained sector. If, as is often claimed, the private sector can be seen as an ‘island’ situated off the mainland of the state sector, policies have variously sought to bring the two into a closer relationship. Traditionally, this

has involved providing a 'drawbridge' to enable the financially disadvantaged but academically able to 'escape' from the state-maintained sector.

'Places for the poor'

The idea that private schools should be accessible to those with limited means goes back to the founding charters of the Public Schools. It was exemplified in Archbishop Cranmer's observation that 'if the gentleman's son' proved unfit for learning, then 'the poor man's son that is apt' should be admitted in his place (cited in Cressy 1976). However, assessment of the extent of family poverty was traditionally lax and, in practice, assisted scholars were considerably outnumbered by fee-payers. This continues to be the case.

In addition to the Public Schools' own obligations to provide places for the poor, post-war governments have also at various points in time provided a 'drawbridge' to the private sector. The Direct Grant scheme, launched in 1945, provided 178 private grammar schools with funds from local authorities on condition that they accept a proportion of non-fee paying students. The extent to which the acceptance of non-fee payers altered the social composition of these schools was contested. When the Public Schools Commission's remit was extended to include direct grant schools, it regarded them as middle-class institutions. However, elsewhere these same schools were described as 'socially pretty comprehensive' (Cobban 1969). These divergent assessments probably arise from wide variations within the direct grant sector in the proportion of free places offered. Across the sector as a whole, the proportion of free places stood at around 50%. However, there was significant variation around this average, with some schools offering only the 25 *per cent* minimum with other (mainly Catholic) schools offering over 90 *per cent*. The safest generalisation is probably that the more academically selective the school, the wider its catchment area and the more socially advantaged its intake. However, the Direct Grant scheme was relatively short-lived. In 1976, as a result of their commitment

to comprehensive schooling, the Labour Government implemented the Commission's recommendation that continued public funding should depend on the Direct Grant schools giving up academic selection. The majority (119 of the 178 schools) chose to continue to remain private rather than give up their selective status.

There was soon strong pressure from within the Conservative Party and the private sector not only for a 'restoration' of a 'drawbridge' to private schooling but for its improvement by means-testing assistance and involving more schools. The result was the Assisted Places Scheme, begun in 1981 with more than 5,000 places in 229 schools. Although 'rescuing' clever working-class children from inadequate local comprehensives had been highlighted in ministerial rhetoric surrounding the launch of the Scheme, and although children from low income families predominated, early evidence showed a high proportion came from 'submerged middle-class homes already well endowed with cultural capital', and a larger presence from 'the impoverished ranks of the bourgeoisie' than of the new working-class customers (Edwards *et al.* 1989; Tapper and Salter 1986). In general, the Scheme was significantly 'colonised' by parents who might have been suffering short-term financial hardship (often because of divorce), but who were in many ways quite culturally and economically advantaged. In our research, fewer than ten *per cent* of those with an assisted place had fathers in manual jobs, whereas 50 *per cent* had fathers in middle-class jobs. Almost all the employed mothers of assisted place pupils were also in middle-class jobs (Edwards *et al.* 1989).

However, the Assisted Places Scheme, like Direct Grant schools, did not last long. The uncomfortable relationship between the Left and private schooling – even for New Labour – is evident in the fact that the Assisted Places Scheme was the first education policy to be dismantled when Tony Blair took office in 1997 under the mantra that New Labour policies should 'benefit the many, not just the few'.

When it ended, the Scheme was assisting almost one in seven pupils in HMC⁴ schools and around 40 *per cent* in around forty of them.

The Assisted Places Scheme's phasing out by the incoming Blair Government was denounced by the private sector as bringing a return to unwanted levels of fee-paid exclusiveness. Measures to 'restore' more socially balanced intakes were therefore initiated by individual schools, by the Girls Schools Trust (GST), and by several charities. The most obviously ambitious was the collaboration between the Sutton Trust and the GST to provide entirely ability-based entry to the Belvedere Girls School in Liverpool. By 2004, 70 *per cent* of its intake paid reduced fees or none at all, and a third had parents who were manual workers or unemployed (Sutton Trust 2004). Dismissing previous efforts to widen access as merely palliative, the Trust's founder argued that a true meritocracy required that access to the best education should depend entirely on academic ability and not on ability to pay; nothing less could 'smash the old British formula of wealth equals opportunity' (Lampl 1999).

In general, these various strategies to widen access through charitable or public funding of fees have had very little effect on the social exclusiveness of these schools. Currently, only a very small proportion of private school pupils actually receive bursaries. The Independent Schools Council (ISC) calculates that across the UK as a whole, only eight *per cent* of pupils receive any form of means-tested bursary assistance (ISC 2018). Help rarely extends to full fee remission. Even for the small minority receiving bursary assistance, only 14 *per cent* are able to attend their school free of charge. Wilde *et al.*'s (2016) research on how private schools discharge the public benefit requirement for having charitable status found that the scale and level of financial support varied widely. For example, one school provided only a ten *per cent* reduction in fees in order to help the 'squeezed' middle classes – which the headteacher defined as 'professional working parents with a combined income of £80,000'

4 The Headmasters' Conference or HMC (technically now renamed as the Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference, although this title is rarely used) is the professional association of headteachers of the leading private schools.

(Wilde *et al.* 2016: 311). In general, it would appear that little has changed since the Fleming Committee Report of 1944, which claimed that these kinds of bursaries were ‘scattered like confetti’ with little transforming effect on either the private sector or the system at large.

From ‘rescuing’ individuals to ‘helping’ state schools

Over the last two decades, the political problem of what to do with England’s private schools has concentrated less on strategies designed to ‘rescue’ the poor but academically able child from the local state comprehensive school and more on the need for institutional realignment between the private and maintained sectors.

Having announced the ending of assisted places, the Labour Government declared that it would provide up to £500,000 for pilot schemes whereby private schools would open up their facilities to local schools. In the following year, the Schools Minister, Estelle Morris, spoke of the Government’s ‘determination to work *with* the private sector to raise standards’ and offered private schools up to £1 million to promote links with the state-maintained sector (Passmore 1998, our emphasis). Government incentives for various kinds of partnership have continued, most notably under Michael Gove as Conservative Education Secretary from 2010-14. Private schools have been encouraged to share facilities, support ‘struggling’ comprehensives and sponsor new academies. It seems to be assumed that the benefits flow only one way – that the private sector itself has nothing to learn. Yet the effects were dismissed by the then Head of Ofsted, Michael Wilshaw, in his 2013 speech to the Headmasters’ Conference as being only ‘crumbs off your table’. He went on to outline the potential of the private sector for bridging social divisions and exhorted headteachers to consider how their mission might ‘really encompass the broader view of your role in building a stronger and fairer society’ (Wilshaw 2013).

The UK Prime Minister, Theresa May, also sees a key role for the private sector in building a stronger and fairer society. In her 2017 speech ‘Britain, the great meritocracy’, she argues that the ‘great schools’ need to ‘extend their reach’. She exhorts them not only to share playing fields, but to offer teaching in ‘minority subjects’ such as further mathematics or classics, as well as take on sponsorship of local schools, and even set up new schools (May 2017). It has also been made possible for private schools to turn themselves into, academies.⁵

As a result of this political encouragement – and the threat that the charitable status of private schools and its associated tax relief may be removed unless they can demonstrate greater public benefit – there is arguably now a much closer relationship between private schools and their state-maintained neighbours. The Independent Schools Council (ISC 2018; 22) reports that nearly nine out of ten private schools have some kind of partnership arrangement. This was also evident in Wilde *et al.*’s (2016) research into how private schools shared their facilities and expertise, sometimes free and in other cases for a charge. Playing fields and swimming pools, for example, were made available out of school hours. In addition to resource-sharing, a small number of independent schools (16 mainstream and three ‘special’) have converted to ‘free school’ status.⁶ A small proportion (three *per cent*), including some of the most prestigious schools, such as Eton College, have sponsored academies.

In the following section we discuss the extent to which these various attempts to reconfigure the relationship between state-maintained and private schools – from widening access to partnership arrangements – have made any significant difference to the close association between a private school education and membership of occupational and social elites. In other words, have private schools

5 Academies are publicly-funded schools that operate outside local authority control and are sponsored by private companies and trusts which gives them considerable independence.

6 A ‘free school’ is an academy that is completely new – or at least ‘new’ to the state sector.

ceased to be the ‘bastion of class privilege’ and instead become a benefactor of the education system as a whole?

Private schooling – bastion of privilege or public benefactor?

There is little doubt that private schools continue to channel their pupils into the ‘top jobs’. Lockwood (1995: 10) referred to the remarkable inter-generational staying power of the upper service class. That power has persisted. Reeves *et al.* (2017) have analysed 120 years of biographical data from *Who’s Who* (the listing of ‘noteworthy and influential people’) since it first appeared in 1897. They found that the nine ‘great’ public schools, which cater for only 0.5 *per cent* of pupils aged 13-18, still account for one in ten of the entries (Reeves *et al.* 2017: 1146). The alumni of these schools are 94 times more likely to reach the occupational elite than those attending any other school. More widely, the *Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission* (2014) reported that seven of the ten senior judges, and over half of Permanent Secretaries and diplomats had been to the leading private schools. Their presence in the background of MPs has fallen since the early 1980s, but was still 37 *per cent* in 2010 and 54 *per cent* on the Conservative benches. When May remade her Cabinet in 2017 to make it 'more like the country it serves', there was still significant representation from private school (34.5 *per cent*) and from Oxbridge alumni (44 *per cent*). The highest levels of the Civil Service, the Church of England, the judiciary, the army and the clearing banks are hardly more ‘representative’ of those they serve. And while some less traditional elites have been more diverse in educational background, a survey of leading journalists found not only that more than half had been to private schools but that the proportion had risen since the early 1980s (Sutton Trust 2006).

While Reeves *et al.* (2017: 1152) found that what they call the ‘propulsive power’ of Britain’s public schools has lessened over the last century, they note that ‘it is important to stress that this decline must be viewed in a wider context of persistence rather than cessation.’ It is also important to note that this propulsive power does not only stem from the private schools’ high levels of entry to

Oxbridge. As Reeves *et al.* (2017: 1160) put it: ‘Whereas Tim-Nice-But-Dim could have conceivably become a Judge in 1916, he may only become a lawyer in 2016’. There is also a greater financial ‘return’ associated with a private school education. A report by the Social Market Foundation finds that the privately-educated earn £193,700 more on average in their early careers (between the ages of 26 and 42) than their state-educated peers. Our own research (Power *et al.* 2007) found that privately educated non-graduates also earned significantly more than their state school counterparts. In short, the alumni of private schools are still earning more and dominating the ‘top jobs’. How the private sector contributes to such income and status advancement is complex, but to some extent reflects a longstanding attribution of ‘elite’ potential through family ties, social networks and the development of a particular cultural cachet. For some entrants to private schools in the past, ‘suitable’ family background could be enough. And as an expanding Empire came to need a much larger officer class, required ‘notions of service, feelings of superiority and habits of authority’ have been described as a continuation of Public School life ‘in its hierarchies, rituals and loyalties’ (Mangan 1988: 8). Old Boy networks were ‘an excellent substitute for the patronage system’ in recruitment to such occupational oases for the meagrely qualified as the Army and the City. Even in the late 1960s, the CBI’s (Confederation of British Industry) submission to the Public Schools Commission (PSC 1968: 229) attributed the occupational prominence of those schools’ ‘Old Boys’ less to past academic success than to ‘qualities of leadership, self-reliance, self-confidence and self-discipline’. Almost a half century later, Reeves *et al.* (2017: 1160) were still attributing much of the power of prominent private schools to an extensive extra-curricular education which endows its pupils with ‘a particular way of being in the world that signals elite status to others’.

Of course, this would matter less if these inequalities were based on meritocratic achievement rather than social background. However, fifty years after the Public Schools Commission (PSC 1968) recorded the strong association between social advantage and private schooling, it is still the case that the most elite schools are largely the preserve of the social elite. This has made it possible to typify

customers for the private sector's upper reaches as 'an educational plutocracy', a professional and managerial 'Super Class', or 'what one may loosely call the senior professional classes' (Labour Party 1980, 5; Adonis & Pollard 1998; Sutton Trust 2001: 10). There is little doubt that the appeal of private schooling is greatest where the Super Class (Adonis and Pollard 1990) is most concentrated. In 1998-9 for example, the proportions of pupils in private schools ranged from none or almost none in 28 local authorities in England to over 15 *per cent* in 25 located mainly in and around London. It was at least one in four in Harrow, Southwark, Surrey, and Richmond-on-Thames – leading to a form of 'educational apartheid' (Sutton Trust 2001)

More generally, and on the basis of longitudinal analysis of nationally representative survey and administrative data, Green *et al.* (2017) could find no evidence that participation in private schooling has become less socially and economically exclusive in recent decades. From 1994 to 2016, a little less than half of private school pupils came from families in the top decile of income distribution. They found no significant change in the pattern of intergenerational persistence of school-type between the periods 1996-2005 and 2006-2013.

It is of course undeniable that the various widening access schemes have benefited *individuals*. Our own research on the destinations of Assisted Place-holders found that the Scheme provided access to learning opportunities and experiences that they might not otherwise have had. In terms of qualifications, simple comparison of GCSE and A-level results revealed that our assisted place holders did better than our state-educated respondents, and better than might have been predicted on the basis of background socio-economic and educational inheritance variables (Power *et al.* 2003; 2006). But their levels of achievements varied widely. Those who saw the highest gains in qualifications were from middle-class backgrounds. The advantages for those from working-class backgrounds were less clear cut, and overall these pupils did *worse* than might be expected. This is largely because these pupils were disproportionately likely to have dropped out of school before they

were 18. These students may have found it difficult to thrive in the more socially exclusive environments of elite private schools.

Far from becoming more accessible in future years, the social exclusiveness of private schools is likely to increase as the fees rise many times faster than real earnings. In the 1970s, parental incomes in the sector's upper reaches were estimated as over twice the national average (Rae 1981: 170). They continued to rise above the rate of inflation, and in the early years of this century by more than twice that rate. During a period of high spending on facilities and staffing ratios intended to strengthen market competitiveness, fifty prominent schools were charged by the Office of Fair Trading in 2006 with unfairly exchanging confidential information about what fees their market might bear. It could apparently bear the £23,000 or more which top boarding schools were then charging. Although fees varied less than might be expected of a market with such large differences in institutional reputation, even the average annual cost of boarding was then close to £19,000. Two-thirds of the population then had incomes below the national average, which was just under £25,000, while being above a threshold of £45,000 meant inclusion in the top ten *per cent* of earners. By 2014, average boarding fees at ISC schools had risen to nearly £29,000, three times what they had been thirty years earlier. Even at day schools the average was £12,700, and affordability was causing concern within and around the sector's 'core client base' (Turner 2015: 249-50). Although an average fee increase of just under four *per cent* in 2017-18 was the lowest for more than twenty years, the rise over the previous ten years was significantly greater than the rate of inflation. Green *et al.* (2017) also note that private school fees have become less affordable in recent years. They have trebled in real terms since 1980 to the extent that the average fee for one child has risen from 20 *per cent* to 50 *per cent* of median income

It is difficult to see how the 'confetti' scattering of bursaries will change this overall picture. Nor should we assume that the benefits of bursary schemes, such as the Assisted Places Scheme, are one-

way. Schools also benefit – even when the bursaries are not publicly-funded. As Wilde *et al.* (2017: 308) point out, providing bursaries can be seen as a conventional economic strategy for price discrimination. In addition to increasing income through attracting students who might not be able to pay the full fee, this can benefit the school through increasing its relative results profile – particularly when it ‘creams’ the more able pupils from state schools.

Similarly, the more recent partnership arrangements where private schools share their resources and expertise are unlikely to bring systemic benefits across the state sector. And, as with bursaries, these kind of activities may benefit the private sector as much as the local state school. Even the headteachers in Wilde *et al.*'s (2017: 314) research reported that their successful partnerships entailed a ‘mutually-profitable exchange’, rather than any form of redistribution. Opening up their schools’ superior resources to pupils from other schools was seen as a powerful marketing strategy. And one headteacher commented on the benefits of allowing their pupils to mix with others in the locality so that they might improve their ability ‘to mix with people from all walks of life’ (315).

The number of academies sponsored by private schools is too small to make much of an impact. And even here, there must be some doubt about how inclusive these new schools actually are. In her ‘meritocracy’ speech referred to earlier, Theresa May praises Eton College for its sponsorship of Holyport College and provides it as an example of how private schools can ‘reach out’ to their local communities. While its academy status means that the education offered is state-funded, 40 percent of its pupils ‘board’, for which parents pay fees of nearly £13,000 p.a. Not surprisingly the school has a lower than average percentage of disadvantaged children. Similarly, the Wellington Academy, sponsored by Wellington College, provides places for boarders, which cost nearly £12,000 p.a. for full boarding. Again, it too has a lower than average percentage of disadvantaged children. Both schools will have considerable numbers of non-local pupils.

Overall, it is hard to see how any of these measures will be of any significant benefit to the over 90 percent of children who attend state-maintained schools in England. Of course, there are other arguments about the system benefits of private schooling. These are voiced very clearly by the Head of Reigate Grammar School, the new chair of the HMC. He argues that his students ‘will take on future leadership roles. They will be opinion formers, wealth creators, employers, healthcare providers. They can create ... fairer society’. At Leavers’ Day, he exhorts them to ‘go and make the world a better place’ (cited in Wilby 2017).

These sentiments take us back to where we began this chapter. With strong echoes of empire-building, they are remarkably reminiscent of the claims of over 150 years ago in the 1864 Clarendon Inquiry that the main function of private schools is to develop the capacity to ‘govern others’.

Conclusion

On the basis of the evidence available, it would appear that the repositioning of the private sector as being beneficial rather than detrimental for the English education system is rhetorical rather than real. Private schools continue to cater largely for the socially advantaged whose advantages are then reproduced through disproportionately high levels of recruitment to elite occupations. Government policies to address this cycle of advantage – whether through enabling and exhorting private schools to ‘rescue’ the academically able child or to share their resources and expertise – have failed to erode the exclusivity of the private sector to any significant degree. Moreover, it can be argued that these strategies have diminished the state-maintained sector even further. Not only do they increase the capacity of private schools to ‘cream’ off the more able children from the local state school, they also are likely to have damaging ideological consequences. They send out the very clear message of the superiority of the private sector. The political problem of what to do about private schooling appears to be as thorny as ever, and solutions as distant.

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