

A Generation of Radical Educational Change

Stories from the field



Edited by RICHARD PRING and MARTIN ROBERTS

A Generation of Radical Educational Change

How much have teachers and their pupils benefited from the top-down, Westminster-led control of policy held in place by a powerful national inspection regime?

A Generation of Radical Educational Change: Stories from the field is an exploration of the revolutionary impact of the greater and continuing involvement of central government in educational policy making, which began in 1976 and was accelerated by the 1988 Education Act and subsequent legislation.

In the book, a dozen distinguished contributors from a wide range of sectors explain and reflect on how they worked to do their best for their schools, teachers and pupils in these years of great change. They understand the reasons, explained by Lord Baker in his early chapter, for a National Curriculum in 1988, and also the reasons for a more effective national inspection system. Yet their stories accumulate to become a powerful critique of the top-down policies of the last two decades. These policies, they say, have been too numerous, short-term, incoherent and partisan; governments have been indifferent to professional opinion and serious research, and have relied excessively on measurable outcomes and simplistic Ofsted judgments. Our current system is narrower and less democratic than it was, but the evidence is hard to find that English pupils are doing any better in international comparisons.

The combined reflections in this volume are timely in these years of lively educational debate, as are the suggestions for future policy. *A Generation of Radical Educational Change* is an invaluable resource for current and aspiring headteachers, policy makers and those with an interest in education policy and how it evolves.

Richard Pring is currently Professor of Education at Winchester University, UK, and was previously Director of the Department of Educational Studies, University of Oxford, UK (1989–2003).

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*Edited by
Richard Pring and
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Contributors

Lord Kenneth Baker had a distinguished political career as a minister in first the Thatcher and then the Major governments. From Minister for Information Technology in 1981 he was promoted first to the Environment and then from 1986 to 1989 to Education where he initiated the decisive reforms that are the main subject of this book. He then became Chair of the Conservative Party and after that Home Secretary. As a life peer, Lord Baker of Dorking, he joined the Upper House in 1997 and with the late Lord Dearing set up the Baker–Dearing Trust, which currently promotes energetically Universities and Technical Colleges (UTCs).

Sir Tim Brighouse started teaching in schools and was a deputy head by the age of 26. He then moved into educational administration becoming CEO of Oxfordshire via posts in Monmouthshire, Buckinghamshire and the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA). After achieving great success as CEO of Birmingham he then, as Chief Commissioner, led the transformation of London's schools through the London Challenge. He was knighted for services to education in 2009.

Tony Eaude is Research Fellow at the Department of Education, Oxford University, and an independent research consultant. After working in special and primary schools he was for nine years headteacher of a multi-cultural first school in Oxford. He has written widely on primary and early years education, notably *Thinking through Pedagogy for Primary and Early Years* (2011) and *How Do Experienced Primary Classteachers Really Work?* (2012).

Kenny Frederick spent her teaching career teaching in inner-city schools. She has just retired after 15 years as headteacher of George Green's school on the Isle of Dogs, Tower Hamlets. She is passionate and committed to an inclusive education for all pupils whatever their needs. A former member of the Executive of the National Association of Head Teachers, she has written frequently for *The Guardian* and commented on educational issues both on television and radio.

Margaret Maden became a deputy head aged 31 at a time when men dominated senior positions in secondary schools. She soon became headteacher of Islington Green School, and later director of the Islington Green Sixth Form Centre, gaining a national reputation for her achievements. From there she moved first to Warwickshire as Chief Education Officer and then to Keele University to run the Centre of Successful Schools. She has written many articles and books. From 1999 to 2002 she was a member of the National Commission for Education.

Sir Peter Newsam started his working life as a civil servant before spending a few years teaching in Oxford. He then moved into educational administration. Chief Education Officer of the Inner London

Educational Authority from 1975 to 1981, he then chaired the Commission for Racial Equality. In the early 1990s he directed the London Institute of Education, before becoming Chief Schools Adjudicator. He was knighted for his services to education and to racial equality. His papers and other publications are now held at the Institute Library and London Metropolitan Archive

Pat O'Shea, from teaching English in a Kent comprehensive school, became a lecturer at the Oxford University Department of Education, and subsequently Deputy Head of Peers School, then nationally famous for its innovative curriculum. She then became a headteacher, first of Bottisham Village College in Cambridge and second of Lord Williams' Thame in Oxfordshire. A much respected LEA adviser and SIP adviser, until recently she was an Ofsted inspector. Jointly with two former headteachers she now runs an education consultancy.

Tim Oates is Director of Assessment, Research and Development at Cambridge Assessment and was appointed in 2011 by the Coalition government to lead the National Curriculum Review Expert Panel. His career has been in educational research at the London Institute of Education, the National Council for Vocational Qualifications and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority. His many publications have won for him an international reputation. His 'Could do better – using international comparisons to refine the National Curriculum' has been particularly influential. In recognition of his contribution to education he was honoured with the CBE in 2015.

Richard Pring retired in 2003 as Director of Oxford University Department of Educational Studies after 14 years, having previously been Dean of the Faculty at Exeter University, lecturer in Curriculum Studies at the Institute of Education, teacher at Goldsmiths College and a London comprehensive, and Assistant Principal in the Ministry of Education. From 2003 to 2009, he led the Nuffield Review of 14–19 Education and Training for England and Wales. Richard Pring is a Fellow of Green-Templeton College Oxford where Sir David Watson was Principal from 2010.

Martin Roberts was headteacher of The Cherwell School in Oxford for 20 years, in which time it changed from a struggling ex-secondary modern to one of the best-regarded schools in the county. He then helped to create the Prince's Teaching Institute, which is now the leading provider of subject-specific training for secondary teachers. He has written articles and books, the latest of which is in collaboration with Michael Young and others, 'Knowledge and the Future School', 2014.

Wendy Scott, OBE, is currently honorary president of TACTYC (Training, Advancement and Cooperation in Teaching Young Children). Headteacher of a nursery school, she then moved to Roehampton Institute as senior lecturer in early years' education. From district inspector first for ILEA and then for Kensington and Chelsea, she became a registered Ofsted inspector. She has also been Chair and Chair Executive of the British Association of Early Childhood Education and an adviser to the Department for Education.

Geoff Stanton worked for 20 years in FE colleges, as a teacher and subsequently as an FE teacher trainer. For eight years he was Director of the Further Education Unit (FEU), which pioneered pre-vocational courses. He was also Special Adviser to the Commission on Adult Vocational Training and Learning. He

is currently a member of the Qualifications Committee of the OCR Examination Board of the Council of the City and Guilds. In the last 15 years he has been engaged in numerous research and development projects, leading to a range of publications.

Peter Wilby helped to run a university newspaper while still a student at Sussex University. He began his adult career at *The Observer* in 1968, becoming its Education Correspondent four years later. He has become one of the country's leading education journalists, writing also for the *New Statesman* and *The Sunday Times*. He has had periods of editing *The Independent on Sunday* and the *New Statesman*. Nowadays he writes as a columnist for the *New Statesman*, *The Guardian* and *The Observer*.

Foreword

Baroness Estelle Morris

Many people teaching today will have witnessed the present education revolution since its start; others will have joined along the way. The careers of longer serving teachers frame the years of this period of change in schools. They will have qualified before the days of the national curriculum, national testing and inspection, and will be able to remember when local authorities, not central government, were at the centre of what happened.

They are the generation who have seen the changes at first hand, but, if change is to be an ally and not a threat, all of us need to understand its context and the journey we are travelling.

The contributors to this book have played key roles at important times in different parts of the education service. Some have been champions of change, others would have preferred a different route, but all have had to try to make the changes work. In this sense, these chapters set out the often conflicting views and opinions that have been the background of education policy and practice for three decades and in doing so they come together to build a narrative of the times.

Anyone looking back at this period could describe it as a time of upheaval. School and college structures, curricula, inspection frameworks, qualifications have all been introduced, amended, and often discarded before there has even been time to properly assess their impact. Sometimes the reasons for change have been badly explained; often the initiatives have seemed relentless.

Yet there have been strong strands of continuity as well. The principles of greater autonomy, a national framework offering an entitlement for all young people, the need for teachers to be held to account, the importance of school and college leadership and the impact of high quality teaching have been threads that have stood the test of time.

Education doesn't exist in isolation, and the pressures for change come as much from outside the system as within. It is no coincidence that a period of great change in education has been also a time of significant change in the wider society.

Greater demands on services, less tolerance of failure, the belief that everyone must succeed and the freedom to exercise choice, all characterise the present public attitude to key services – and these too have been some of the pressures for change.

Equally, the speed of development in communication and the opportunities offered by digital technology have transformed our understanding of how children learn, and schools must reflect this if they are to remain relevant to those they teach.

Education has at times led change – the achievement of ethnic minorities, for example – yet in other areas it has been slow to change. Schools embraced educational technology long after most other sectors and they are only just beginning to give it the importance it deserves.

These are not easy times for those who teach but, at its core, education remains the greatest route to freedom, self-respect, fulfilment and social justice. It will always attract the attention of others who share the ambition to change the world for the better and, as a result, it cannot and must not stand still.

Although change will be an ever-present force for those who work in education, we must get better at how we lead it, manage it, evaluate it and take others on the journey. This book is not only a testament to the past but a most valuable source of wisdom for the future. We should all learn from it.

Editors' note: Virtually all the text of this book was written in the months before the General Election in May 2015. We have left it unchanged since, in the few months since then, the Conservative government, which replaced the Coalition, has left the main thrust of educational policy-making unchanged, exemplified by its drive against 'coasting schools' and its continuing pressure on schools to become academies.

Background

The 1944 Education Act introduced secondary education for all in a 'maintained system' – that is, a system maintained by local education authorities in partnership with the voluntary bodies (mainly the churches) who owned many of the schools, along with the teaching profession and with central government (which had overall responsibility for ensuring there would be sufficient schools and teachers).

The 70 years since this major Act of Parliament have seen considerable changes:

- to greater government control in the partnership between central, local government and schools;
- in the evolving structure of 'secondary education for all' up to 16 (then education or training for all up to 18);
- in the creation of a teaching profession (through initial and continuing professional education appropriate for these changes and higher aspirations);
- in the development of a national curriculum;
- in developing systems of testing and examining to reflect the achievements of all;
- in the increasing accountability of schools and of the system; and
- in the world of employment and higher education into which pupils are to enter.

Throughout this period, there have been considerable demographic and economic changes to which schools, colleges and the system have had to adapt, some more successfully than others.

More recently, many of the principles of the 1944 Education Act have given way to a system that:

- puts much greater power in the hands of the Secretary of State (diminishing thereby the power of local authorities);
- has introduced voluntary, private and for-profit organisations into the control of schools; and
- made accountability much more focused on measurable targets.

The changes since 1976 are very substantial, therefore – indeed, revolutionary.

Much has been written about these developments, but in a fragmented way. What too often are lacking are concrete examples, which give life to successes and difficulties as schools, colleges, teacher education establishments, examination boards and local authorities navigate their way through the changes.

This book, therefore, seeks to provide cases of the hopes and fears, the successes and failures over four decades in response to national policies. Then, drawing on these accounts and learning lessons from them, the book looks to the future, making a number of proposals for the way forward.

Part I

Introduction

Setting the scene

History and Overview of Changes 1976–2014

Martin Roberts and Richard Pring

Introduction

The last 40 years have witnessed such radical changes in the educational and training system that few who are now engaged in teaching, and few among the general public, can have much conception of where the system has emerged. But it is important that they should do so. It is important to see how and why a system has changed in order to understand it critically and to see how it might be changed yet further for the better.

This book therefore seeks to provide an account of those changes, not simply through a historical narrative (although such a narrative permeates the chapters and is explicitly provided in this introductory chapter), but also through the experiences of those who have lived and worked through the changes and who have had to adapt, often critically, to them.

In [Chapter 17](#) we draw together some of the major themes that emerge from the following chapters and make some recommendations for the next generation.

Setting the scene

In particular, the 1944 Education Act preceded our history by several decades. But reference to it is necessary for two reasons. First, it shaped the educational system for 30 years, and the period covered in this book reflects the gradual erosion of that post-war political settlement. Second, such a reference shows starkly how matters have changed.

The 1944 Act created ‘a national service locally administered’. It established a partnership between central government (which had ultimate responsibility for overall expenditure), local education authorities (which provided education to all children ‘according to age, ability and aptitude’), the voluntary bodies (that is churches and non-denominational bodies that provided many of the schools now entering the national system) and the teachers. The Minister had two major responsibilities – to ensure there were enough school places for all pupils and to ensure there were enough teachers to teach them. The Minister had no control over what was taught or how it was taught – these were regarded as too important to be put in the hands of politicians. After all, a war was being fought against totalitarian governments whose government ministers controlled the schools and what was taught in them.

The Act never dictated how ‘according to age, ability and aptitude’ should be interpreted. That was in the hands of the local education authorities (LEAs) and the teachers. Most LEAs interpreted this for the new secondary system of education in terms of three types of school fitting (in the words of the 1966 Norwood Report) three types of adolescent, namely, grammar schools for the few capable of abstract thought and interested in ideas; technical schools for those interested in and capable of the application of ideas in technology; and secondary moderns for the majority who were more concerned with practical activities and the immediate environment. However, some authorities – London County Council, West Riding of Yorkshire and Leicestershire – decided to develop schools attended by children of all abilities and aptitudes as comprehensives.

Subsequent years saw the gradual questioning of this threefold division of adolescents and therefore of schools – a questioning that was evolving significantly during the period covered by this book.

Hence, this chapter provides an outline of the political and social changes that impacted on educational institutions between 1976 and 2015, as these have affected the ‘national system locally administered’. Our contributors illuminate many of them in the following chapters.

The political context

Labour and Conservative governments 1945–2015

In the 70 years since the Second World War, Labour formed governments for 30 years, the Conservatives including a Tory-dominated coalition, for 40. In our chosen period since 1976, Labour governed for 18 years, the Conservatives for 23. The sequence was as follows: Labour 1945–1951 (Attlee), Conservatives 1951–1955 (Churchill), Labour 1955–1964 (Churchill, Eden, Macmillan, Douglas-Home), Labour 1964–1970 (Wilson), Conservatives 1970–1974 (Heath), Labour 1974–1979 (Wilson, Callaghan), Conservatives 1979–1997 (Thatcher, Major), Labour 1997–2010 (Blair, Brown), Conservative–Liberal Democrat Coalition 2010–2015 (Cameron).

The 1970s were a watershed in British politics. The quadrupling of the oil price after 1973 led to extraordinary inflation, which hit a record 25 per cent per annum in 1975. Simultaneously destructive industrial unrest caused the British economy, already weak, to lurch from crisis to crisis. In 1976, Denis Healey, Labour Chancellor of the Exchequer, had to negotiate a huge loan from the International Monetary Fund. The implicit consensus between the two main parties began to break. The final breaking point was the ‘winter of discontent’ in 1979 when public sector workers, fighting the attempt of Callaghan’s government to sustain a pay policy, went on strike. Rubbish piled up in the street. Schools closed. A public sense that something was badly wrong helped Mrs Thatcher to power. Conservative policy after 1979 consciously shook off the One Nation Toryism of Macmillan and Heath. Similarly Blair’s New Labour, which emerged in the 1990s, distanced itself in policy as well as in name from the Labour values of Wilson, Callaghan and Attlee, further developing policies initiated by Mrs Thatcher.

The pre-1970s consensus

In 1954, *The Economist* coined the term 'Butskellism' to describe the common features of the policies of Harold Macmillan, the Conservative Chancellor of the Exchequer, and Gaitskell, his Labour counterpart. They both accepted the main achievements of the Attlee government, particularly the welfare state (which meant comparatively high and redistributive taxation) and the nationalisation of the country's major industries. They believed in a mixed economy with both private and public ownership. They were Keynesian in that they believed that the state should increase public spending in times of crisis to sustain overall demand and avoid significant rises in unemployment. They accepted that trade unions mattered and believed in the effectiveness of local authorities.

The Thatcher/Blair consensus, 1979–the present

The Thatcher government rejected Keynesianism, which it considered to be the cause of serious inflation and the enemy of private enterprise. Influenced by Friedrich Hayek who argued for a diminished role for the state and by Friedman who considered inflation a greater threat than unemployment and whose monetarist doctrine stated that inflation was best reduced by the government controlling the amount of money in circulation, the Conservative government managed to bring inflation under control but at the price of high unemployment, which reached 3.2 million in 1985. Rather than a mixed economy it proved a firm believer in the superiority of private enterprise over public ownership. Major industries were privatised, for example British Gas and British Rail, and where possible market forces were given even greater freedom. The 'big bang' of 1986 deregulated the financial markets of the City of London and made possible, for good and ill, the rapid expansion of the City as a major player in global finance.

The Centre for Policy Studies, founded by Sir Keith Joseph in 1974 together with Margaret Thatcher and Alfred Sherman, argued the case for a Social Market economy and privatisation of such public monopolies as education and health – more deregulation and liberalisation. It considered 'education vouchers' but thought that too big an undertaking. The philosophical thinking of Hayek and Friedman thereby entered into the management of public services in general and education in particular. It was cogently expressed by Sir Keith Joseph, later to become Secretary of State for Education, that:

the blind, unplanned, uncoordinated wisdom of the market is overwhelmingly superior to the well-researched, rational, systematic, well-meaning, cooperative, science-based, forward looking, statistically respectable plans of government.

(Joseph, 1979)

Thatcher's government kept a strict control over public expenditure, capping the funds it made available to local government, which it regarded as bloated and too close to the unions. As for public services where she could not privatise, Mrs Thatcher centralised.

A new 'management language' was emerging in a series of Government White Papers that straddled the Thatcher/Blair years. The shift in the control and management of public services was explained in a series of Government White Papers from HM Treasury and the Cabinet Office: *Modern Public Services in Britain: Investing in Reform* (1988, Cm. 4011); *Public Services for the Future: Modernisation, Reform, Accountability* (1998, Cm. 4181); *The Government's Measures of Success: Outputs and Performance Analyses* (1999, Cm. 4200); *Modernising Government* (1999, Cm. 4310). One important consequence of these White Papers (and thus of the 'modernisation' of public services) was what was

referred to as 'public service agreements'. These were agreements over funding from HM Treasury, first to Departments of State in terms of overall targets, which were then 'cascaded down' in more precise forms, to the institutions that were the responsibilities of the respective Departments. In education, this was spelt out partly in terms of the proportion of students at different schools achieving so many GCSEs at different grade levels. But that gradually emerged as a way of rewarding teachers through 'performance-related pay'.

Where possible Thatcher's government cut income tax (for example, Lawson's 1988 Budget, which reduced the tax on the rich to 40 per cent and on everyone else to 25 per cent). As for the trade union-breaking their power was a Thatcher priority, broadly supported by public opinion. Here 1984 was the key year when Scargill, the Marxist leader of the National Union of Mineworkers, who had humiliated Heath's government a decade earlier, called an all-out strike to end pit closures. The government was well prepared with plenty of coal stocks and police effectively deployed to prevent aggressive picketing. After a year the miners went back to work, totally defeated. The government passed a series of laws that severely restricted the power of the unions.

The Conservatives were able to stay in power for 18 years, but not because their policies were particularly popular. In the general election of 1987, when Mrs Thatcher was at her strongest, she won only 42 per cent of the vote with a turnout of 75 per cent of the electorate. Labour's problem in the 1980s was that it was dominated by the Left and the trades unions, and its moderates had split away to form the Social Democratic Party, which was to merge with the Liberals. Social and economic changes had undermined Old Labour and its traditional working class support in declining industrial areas. Most voters thought of themselves as middle class. If Labour was ever to gain power, Blair with his small group of allies – Brown, Mandelson and Gould – decided that the party needed to be rebranded as New Labour and to accept the main Thatcherite policies of privatisation, low taxes, friendly towards business, cool towards the unions and local government, and centralising where public services were concerned. With the UK needing to compete in an increasingly global market, Blair and Brown saw no alternative but to encourage free enterprise. Blair, though he thought Mrs Thatcher a bit dotty, had much respect for her achievements, and she came to regard him as her real successor.

Like Thatcher, Blair's popularity was less well-rooted than it seemed. The main reason for New Labour's success in 1997 was the unpopularity of the Conservatives. He won only 44 per cent of the vote, less than Attlee and Wilson, and the voter turnout was lower too, at 71 per cent. His popularity declined in 2001 to 42 per cent of the voters, with 59 per cent voting. In 2005, his share of the vote had further declined to 35 per cent, with 61 per cent of the electorate voting. Throughout these years of radical reform neither Conservatives nor Labour had the explicit support of more than one in three of the electorate. After 2001 it dropped to one in four. More and more young people did not bother to vote.

Though in many ways the New Labour government had its distinctive policies, particularly with regard to relieving child poverty and support of minorities, the main thrust of its economics was similar to that of its predecessor, so much so that Peter Riddell writing in *The Times* commented that 'a economist from Mars would conclude that the same government had been in charge throughout the second half of the 1990s'.

The implications for education of this dramatic political change post-1979

Erosion of the political consensus

What did this mean for education? Before 1976, the political consensus accepted that schools should have freedom over the curriculum and gave LEAs the funding and discretion necessary to develop systems that best met local needs. Broadly speaking, it supported the end of selection at 11 plus and the spread of comprehensive schools. In the early 1970s Mrs Thatcher, as Secretary of State for Education, oversaw an accelerating comprehensive programme. The Schools Council, an advisory council on curriculum development and examinations, dominated by teachers but abolished by the Tory Sir Keith Joseph in 1984, was set up in 1964 by the Tory Sir Edward Boyle. The universities, expanding after the Robbins Report of 1963, were independent of government controls, their funding coming mainly through the independent Universities Grants Committee (UGC). Further Education (FE) too was expanding but remained the responsibility of LEAs.

However, when Callaghan spoke at Ruskin College in October 1976 this consensus was disintegrating. Within a few years, governments reduced education spending, the powers of local government and the independence of teachers. They encouraged the market through greater parental choice and a variety of schools (for example, Grant Maintained, City Technology Colleges, Specialist Schools, Academies, Free Schools and University Technical Colleges). The main criterion of the success of the education sector was to be seen in the extent to which it contributed to the economic success of UK plc. Ofsted would ensure accountability. And that accountability was expressed and conducted increasingly in the new language of management, that is, in terms of targets and performance indicators.

The key legislation, of course, was the 1988 Education Act, which in effect replaced that of 1944. Now the government was in charge of pupils' learning, establishing a detailed National Curriculum with its levels of assessment, and funding directly (by-passing the LEAs) the new City Technology Colleges. From a 'national system locally maintained' was evolving a 'national system nationally maintained'.

The Conservatives had a deep-seated distrust of what they tended to describe as the 'educational establishment', which in 2013 the Coalition Secretary of State, Michael Gove, referred to less decorously as 'the Blob'. This distrust had in the early 1970s been reflected in the Black Papers, edited by Cox and Dyson (1967–1972) for the Centre for Policy Studies, which attacked in particular the growing attachment to comprehensive schools. They were particularly suspicious of university-based teacher training, reflected in Sheila Lawlor's paper 'Teachers Mistaught' (Lawlor, 1990).

By the Higher and Further Education Act of 1992, both higher and further education passed under greater government control. Mrs Thatcher distrusted university teachers as much as schoolteachers. The Higher Education Funding Council (HEFC) replaced the UGC and made sure that universities directed their efforts towards national priorities as defined by the government that, again like schools, were to increase the economic competitiveness of the UK. As for further education, the polytechnics became independent of LEAs, were renamed universities and funded through the HEFC. Other FE colleges also passed out of LEA control and were funded through the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) under

the new Learning and Skills Council took on its functions in 2001. Both the Labour and Conservative parties in the twenty-first century came to believe that Higher Education (HE) and FE fees were unavoidable, though they argued about the fees' level.

New Labour accepted the main thrusts of Tory education policy, *Choice and Diversity* (the title of John Patten's White Paper in 1992) becoming a mantra. Blair thought teachers were among the forces of conservatism hampering him in his mission to modernise Britain, as set out in the White Papers referred to above. LEAs fared no better. When New Labour introduced its Academies programme in the 2001 Education Act, they would be directly answerable to the Secretary of State. In other ways New Labour was even more centralising than the Conservatives, enacting many laws and regulations and creating quangos. It was stronger too on accountability, Ofsted swelling in its size and authority after 1997. The influential teacher unions of the 1970s, particularly the National Union of Teachers (NUT), declined especially after the protracted but fruitless strikes of 1985–1987.

Again there was considerable continuity when the Coalition took over from Labour in 2010. Michael Gove, the new Secretary of State, accelerated the Academies programme, introduced academy chains and established many more academies run by churches, charities and for-profit companies such as Serco and Capita, and increased diversity and choice by introducing Free Schools. He continued the custom of Secretaries of State, if with unusual passion, to intervene in the curriculum and assessment.

As more women were working and keen to return to work after child-bearing, early years and nursery education gained a higher profile. One of the last Acts passed by John Major's government was the Nursery and Grant-Maintained Act of 1996, the aim of which was to encourage the expansion of nursery schools. A major and valuable initiative of New Labour was the Sure Start Programme, aimed at families living on benefits. It was intended not only to give potentially deprived children a better start in life but to help their mothers back to work. Since 2010 the Sure Start local programmes have become Sure Start Children's Centres and have the theoretical support of the main parties. Furthermore, the Labour government's 2004 Children's Act *Every Child Matters* set out five outcomes for all children (be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution to society, and enjoy economic wellbeing). However in the post-2008 austerity, many of the Centres have suffered cuts.

Examinations and examination standards

GCE O- and A-Level examinations started in 1951. In 1976 schools could choose from syllabuses offered by eight independent boards, which had started as university-run enterprises and had university teachers actively involved in the setting and evaluation of papers. They could also choose CSE syllabuses for the less academic pupils. The Certificate of Secondary Education was introduced in 1962 (first sat for in 1963) to provide a final examination goal for secondary modern students originally intended for the next 40 per cent of the ability range, after the 20 per cent who took O Level. It is worthy of note that, until this time there were no publicly funded examinations for those not taking O-Level examinations. The CSE was conducted by many regional boards. However, as more schools went comprehensive, this dual system became increasingly clumsy and the two systems merged, with the first exams sat in 1988. GCE boards also merged and so now there are four main ones – AQA, Edexcel, OCR and WJEC. Active involvement by university teachers is less. A new examination between GCSE and A Level, AS, was introduced

2000. Much to the irritation of teachers, pupils and their parents, ministers tinkered frequently with exam details, for example, coursework and the recent proposal to decouple AS Level from A Level (see [Chapter 10](#) for a deeper understanding of these changes).

The English and Welsh exam system has chalked up some impressive achievements. It caters for ever increasing numbers, setting and marking to a tight timescale each year. Standards appear to be rising substantially over time. In 1976 only 23 per cent of pupils gained 5 A-C O-Level passes and 15 per cent of school leavers gained no grade at all. In 2014, 69 per cent reached the equivalent GCSE score with hardly any candidates failing to get at least one grade. At A-Level in 1976 only about 70 per cent gained at least one pass. In 2014 it was 96 per cent.

However, the question of whether or not present examinations are as difficult as their predecessors is hard to answer. Where A-Level pass rates are concerned, comparing 1976 with 2014 is impossible because in 1976 the results were norm-referenced, allowing only a fixed percentage to pass. In the 1980s the Boards introduced criterion referencing – that is, meeting specific levels achieved, not determined by formerly agreed norms. Some critics ascribe the striking improvements in grades to changes in the format of the exam papers. The syllabuses specify in greater detail how marks are allocated, and teachers have become evermore skilful in getting their pupils to concentrate on these specifications. Many of the critics would then argue that ‘teaching to the test’ in such a way is not obviously good educational practice. Recently teacher confidence in the reliability of the marking has lessened and the Boards have had difficulty in finding well-qualified markers. Moreover, in the attempts to bring equivalences between different sorts of examination within a single system, a National Qualifications Framework (NQF) was established in the 1990s, superseded by the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) in 2008, intending to show how the myriad of vocational, prevocational, GCSE and A-Level qualifications related to each other in terms of equivalence in standard, even though they were radically different in content and purpose. By deft use of equivalences, schools’ GCSE results rose dramatically, as did their place in the league tables.

In 2008 New Labour set up Ofqual to supervise the whole system. Successive governments have used this apparent (though, as indicated above, severely questioned) improvement in exam results, especially at GCSE, to argue that their reforms are working. The jury is out on this case. Not until the late 1990s did the Education Reform Act (ERA) reforms bed down. GCSE results improved rapidly from their start in 1988. Would they not have continued to improve if schools had been left to get on with the job?

Vocational education and training

In 1851, the year of the Great Exhibition, Britain was the leading industrial power whose inventors, engineers and technical prowess were the envy of the world. Soon that status was challenged, first by the USA and Germany and latterly by Asia. Since the nineteenth century, the inadequacy of our technical and vocational education, particularly in comparison to continental Europe, has been a frequent refrain. The Royal Commission on Technical Instruction articulated it strongly in 1884, so did the Spens Committee in 1938. The 1944 solution to the problem, new technical schools, failed because the near bankruptcy of the immediate post-war years meant that only a handful were ever built. Between 1945 and 1976 the best of vocational education occurred in some secondary modern schools or post-16 colleges offering

examinations provided by the City and Guilds of London Institute (CGLI) and by the RSA.

An important thread of the 1976 Ruskin speech was the need for the education system to respond more directly to the needs of the world of work. The collapse of manufacturing during the 1970s and 1980s and the jump in unemployment as a result of the first Conservative budgets after 1979 made technical and vocational education a priority of every government since then. A priority it may have been but, of all the unequivocal policy failures of the last 40 years, the inability to create a thriving vocational offer for 14–19-year-olds must rank among the worst.

Therefore, to promote more vocational *education* in schools, the Department for Education established the Further Education Unit (FEU) to develop general education courses and qualifications based on occupation-related interests. The FEU published a series of papers, beginning with *A Basis for Choice and Vocational Preparations*. These led to a series of ever-changing qualifications – CGLI 36 succeeded by CPVE, succeeded by DoVE, succeeded by 14–19 Diplomas, succeeded by nothing yet.

The Conservative government did get off to a good start in 1982 when it announced TVEI, the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative, which tied in with these pre-vocational courses. Run not by the DfE but the Manpower Services Commission, established in 1974 so as to by-pass LEAs in the promotion and financing of employment-related activities in colleges and schools, it funded local projects where schools, colleges, LEAs and businesses developed their own schemes. The Education Reform Act (ERA) in 1988, with its emphasis on a new National Curriculum, effectively scuppered TVEI, which by 1997 had petered out. The Thatcher government also set up the National Council for Vocational Qualifications which established a system of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) and employer-led Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) to take responsibility for local youth training needs. In 1992 Major's government called on Sir Ron Dearing, who had already 'slimmed down' the National Curriculum, to bring some coherence to a messy range of academic and vocational qualifications. He recommended three pathways, (i) GCSEs/A Levels, (ii) GNVQs (General NVQs) and (iii) NVQs.

New Labour set up a new quango, the Learning and Skills Council, to provide a more coherent approach to education and training. However, in its short life of nine years that coherence eluded them. There were simply too many national, regional, local organisations and business interests competing for student-led funds. Experts clamoured for a new approach that would bring 'parity of esteem' between the academic and vocational pathways. In 2004 the Tomlinson Report on the 14–19 Reform seemed to find a way forward with its plan for an overarching Diploma. However, despite its widespread professional support (and the Secretary of State, Ed Balls' claim that this would be the qualification of choice for all 14–18 year olds), Prime Minister Blair vetoed it as electorally too risky as it might seem to challenge the A-Level gold standard. A new big idea of Advanced Diplomas sank under the weight of its ambitions. The essence of the British problem with vocational education was, as Alison Wolf put it in 2002, that it was 'a great idea for other people's children'. The many attempts to design an effective vocational pathway were for the most part designed by civil servants and advisers who themselves had little experience of industry and business and had no thought of encouraging their own children to follow such a pathway. Most pupils, looking at the world around them, decided that their life chances were better if they stuck to GCSEs and A Levels.

The Coalition government abolished the Learning and Skills Council and called in Alison Wolf to review the existing state of vocational qualifications. She recommended a cull of many of the Applied

GCSEs and other qualifications that had emerged over the years, endorsed BTEC as an A-Level equivalent and apprenticeships as a good way forward (Wolf, 2011). The government accepted his recommendations. Nonetheless our technical and vocational provision remains poor compared with much of the developed world.

Social contexts

Female empowerment

The first challenges to the many post-war conventions, which were to change British society irrevocably, occurred in the 1960s. These conventions included the importance of marriage, the disapproval of sex outside marriage and of divorce and only a limited number of jobs being regarded, at least by the middle classes, as suitable for women. In the 1970s, the pace of empowerment quickened. Germaine Greer's *Female Eunuch* was published in 1970 and feminist attitudes proved infectious. Also in 1970, the Labour government passed the Equal Pay Act, following the 'Made in Dagenham' strike of female machinists at the Ford plant. The contraceptive pill became available on the NHS in 1975. Women increasingly believed that the opportunities which men had always taken for granted should be also open to them and that they could organise their lives to seize them.

This new ambition was expressed particularly clearly in education. Girls had always done better than boys at 11+ but in the 1980s they did better at GCSE, continued into the sixth form and then on to university. By 1996 women applicants just about outnumbered male ones but, by 2014, when a record number of students (about 40 per cent of the cohort) entered university, women significantly outnumbered men. There remained an issue about choice of subjects, with physics and technological subjects still being male-dominated both at school and university. Nonetheless, though full equality has yet to be achieved, the transformation of British society has been great. Britain had had a female prime minister. Whereas in the 1979 election, 11 women had been elected to Parliament, in 2010 it was 14. Many of the country's outstanding headteachers were female, and England's women's cricket, football and rugby teams often did better on the international stage than their male counterparts. For the most part, schools and universities (even the once proudly segregated Oxbridge colleges) contributed positively to this change.

Immigration and race relations

Another socially transforming trend has been immigration. Starting after the war with immigrants from the West Indies, others from the Indian sub-continent soon followed. By 1956, the new immigrant population was assessed at about 180,000 and rapidly increased during the 1960s. Governments quietly approved of immigration as its mainly cheap labour boosted the economy. However, immigration caused public disquiet, which was extravagantly though popularly expressed in 1968 by the Conservative M

Enoch Powell in his 'rivers of blood' speech. Successive governments have tried both to limit immigration by a series of Immigration Acts and to encourage racial harmony by such measures as the Race Relations Acts of 1968 and 1976. Efforts to limit numbers have failed. In 1981, the immigrant population had reached more than 2 million, about 4 per cent of the population. According to the 2001 census, the proportion of whites had fallen to 86 per cent, with ethnic minorities rising to more than 14 per cent. They tended to be concentrated in conurbations, especially London and the West and East Midlands. This increase has been due partly to legal immigration (though much unquantifiable illegal immigration has taken place) and people seeking asylum from trouble spots like Somalia, and partly to the higher fertility rates of immigrant families. In recent years, immigration from countries of Eastern Europe that are members of the EU, particularly Poland, has risen sharply. In 2013, though the Coalition government was trying to lessen it to 'tens of thousands', net migration into the UK was c.212,000.

Relationships between the races have often been difficult. Serious race riots occurred in 1981 in Brixton, Toxteth and Moss Side (mainly against the police), in 1985 in Brixton and Birmingham, and in 2001 in some northern towns. The Ouseley Report in 2003, *Community Pride, Not Prejudice*, made strong recommendations on the important role of schools. The worst riots of all in 2011, which started in London and spread to other cities, had racial elements. They were sparked by the police shooting of a black man who they suspected of gun crime, and more than half the rioters were black youths. However, many white youths attacked the police and property, making the rioting more anarchic than racist.

A low point in race relations came in 1993 when a black teenager, Stephen Lawrence, on his way home from school, was murdered by a white gang. The Metropolitan Police botched the inquiry and failed to bring the suspects to justice. The subsequent Macpherson Report accused the Met of institutional racism.

The DfE, LEAs and urban schools have responded to this immense challenge impressively. The impact of London Challenge on the performance of these schools in particular has been impressive. But, much previously, the Wilson government started Section 11 funding to help ethnic minorities. This funding continues as the Ethnic Minority Achievement Grant (EMAG). Almost without exception schools have committed themselves to an explicit anti-racist agenda.

Religious trends

English people, though most still call themselves Anglican, have largely stopped being practising Christians. Barely 10 per cent attended church regularly in the 1970s and that number has steadily fallen. Though the Church of England remains the national Established Church, it came to look increasingly anachronistic, especially because of its protracted debates about homosexuality and whether women could become priests. On the other hand, it should be noted that the 1944 Act, in order to create a national system, had to include within it 'voluntary controlled' (Anglican) and 'voluntary aided' (Catholic) schools that, at that time, provided education for the majority of pupils. The national system was, and remained until recently, a partnership between the government, the local education authorities and the churches.

Paradoxically, within education, Christian and other 'faith' schools have flourished. In 1976 the only 'faith' schools were Christian or Jewish. They proved popular and tended to show up well in the league

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