



# **‘Why do we truss up our children in suits more appropriate for an investment bank than a river bank?’**

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## Just what the blazers is going on?

Are politicians right to view school uniforms with such approval? **Stephanie Northen** unpicks this sartorial trend and finds it has more to do with social inequality than standards and behaviour

There is a depressing uniformity about Labour and Tory policies with regard to school uniform. Both seem intent on burrowing ever deeper into children's wardrobes while primly endorsing the increasingly obsessive policing of what young people wear to school.

Education Secretary Ed Balls wrote to local authorities late last year calling for more 'smart' uniforms and (rather sinisterly) for schools to build up links with 'uniformed' organisations like the scouts and guides. For the Tories, Michael Gove has made speeches championing blazers and ties. Both parties' attitudes can be summed up by the Conservative policy paper which said: 'We have observed that the best-performing schools tend to have strict school uniform policies, with blazer, shirt and tie, and with zero tolerance of incorrect or untidy

dress.' That was back in 2007 – and it is interesting to note what was going on across the Atlantic at the same time.

In New Jersey, two boys, aged 11 and 13, were in trouble with their teachers. Their crime was to wear a badge protesting the school district's attempt to impose uniform on pupils up to age of 15. The badges depicted serried ranks of Hitler Youth – all slicked-back hair, neckerchiefs and button-down shirts. Printed over the top in red were the words 'No School Uniforms'.

The boys' schools threatened to suspend them, insisting the badges were offensive. The parents retorted that suspension would be an infringement of their right to free speech – as was the district's decision to introduce mandatory uniforms. One mother wrote: 'I've gotten overwhelming support from many people that tell me that they absolutely agree with what the image depicted, an ominously homogenous group of blindly cooperative children. The picture makes a profound statement about what can happen when we turn children into "uniform" followers.'

The boys won their case over the badges, and, though

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they failed to stop the spread of uniform in America, they made their point. Sadly, it is not one often made in the UK. Here legal wrangles over uniform are usually about whether a school should accommodate a garment worn for religious reasons. Shabina Begum’s belief that she had the right to wear a full-length jilbab to a Luton high school took the Muslim pupil all the way to the House of Lords – where in 2006 she lost. Lydia Playfoot was equally convinced that not being allowed to wear her ‘purity ring’ to school constituted an ‘unlawful interference’ with her fundamental right to express her Christian faith – in this case her belief in the importance of chastity before marriage. In 2007, the High Court ruled against her and against a 12-year-old Muslim girl who wanted to wear the niqab, or full-face veil, to her Buckinghamshire school.

Even though these girls lost their cases, the fact that they were brought resulted in schools making tremendous efforts to fine-tune their uniforms to accommodate religious sensitivities. But what about all the children who would rather, on purely secular grounds, be dressed by H&M than HM government? Is their right to determine their identity to be disregarded simply because it is not a religious identity?

There are very occasional protests. For example, pupils at Abertillery comprehensive school burnt their ‘horrible, itchy’ black blazers after the head insisted that they be worn. But such demonstrations are largely only reported in local papers and then as a bit of a laugh.

Of course none of this would matter if we had the confidence just to say no. No to school uniforms which have to conform to rules stretching sometimes over three A4 pages, as is the case with more than one of the new academies. These schools appear to relish dressing their pupils like junior yacht-club members or, even more unfortunately, like miniature City traders.

Why are we doing this? In an age which supposedly values ‘personalised’ education and the ‘children’s voice’, why do we insist that all young people look the same? In an age that bemoans the loss of tree-climbing, field-scampering, risk-taking childhood, why do we truss up our children in suits more appropriate for an investment bank than a river bank? In an age that trumpets entrepreneurship, why are we bundling up our most enterprising spirits in polyester and Teflon? Our children look mass produced. They have been branded to sell their schools.

Yet when anyone mutters about freedom of expression, politicians gleefully quote statistics showing that 89 per cent of parents are in favour of uniform – and what’s more, so are many pupils. We’re told that they encourage team spirit, a community ethos within schools, that they help hide differences between rich and not-so rich kids and hence reduce bullying. And, of course, children are consulted about the design of their uniforms. Hmm. I remember being asked at age 14 to write an essay about why youth clubs were a good thing. ‘Youth clubs keep us off the streets,’ I dutifully wrote, despite the fact that neither I nor any of my classmates were regularly, if ever, to be found ‘on the streets’. It is unsettling to think that people are pleased that so many children at so many secondary schools apparently lust after blazers, ties and v-neck jumpers. Are we breeding a nation of conformists – is that really what is wanted in an age of global challenges?

Perhaps children opt for blazer and tie because they and their parents think that’s what the posh kids have (though no private school yet lists Tesco as its uniform supplier). And then when the gloss has worn off they start to customise it – everyone knows there are 101 ways not to wear a tie and teachers rarely check that

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socks match. It’s not long before the old divides open up again – those between rich and poor, between the innately stylish and the clothes horses – and no one is more acute at detecting these than children.

But does that matter if uniform really does improve behaviour and discipline? In fact, there are mixed messages out there regarding such claims – frequently repeated by politicians and those with money to make. (A well-publicised piece of research which ‘revealed’ that pupils ‘enjoyed the sense of pride they get from wearing a smart uniform and the smarter the better’ was in fact commissioned by the Schoolwear Association.)

A decade of research in America by David Brunson found that uniform actually had a slightly negative effect on behaviour and performance. Sir Alan Steer’s respected report on behaviour in schools in England does not mention uniform once in its 47 recommendations. Uniforms do not, of themselves, make schools more orderly places – they do result in staff endlessly having to niggle at pupils to get them to conform.

Certainly David Cameron should not stress the power of clothing to regulate behaviour. The infamous Bullingdon Club photo showed members dressed in the regulation blue tie, tails and biscuit-coloured waistcoats. Far from imposing discipline on the group, the £1,000 uniform was presumably in tatters several hours later as a result of, in the words of London mayor Boris Johnson, ‘a number of us crawling on all fours through the hedges of the botanical

gardens and trying to escape police dogs’.

Parents are also told that a blazer and tie go hand in hand with rising standards. No one remarks that struggling academies have as strict a uniform policy as those that are flourishing. In fact it takes a headteacher equipped with vision and verve – not polyester and Teflon – to improve a school. Often there is an outward manifestation of their vision – perhaps a particular goal, or a particular commitment, maybe to sustainability, to singing, to drama or to reaching out to the community. It doesn’t really matter what ‘it’ is – and ‘it’ can include a uniform – just so long as it is implemented with passion and confidence. A charismatic headteacher could get his or her school to the top of the league tables by teaching the whole curriculum through the study of Icelandic fishing techniques.

So what is really going on? Interestingly, the rise of school uniform mirrors the rise in social inequality. The 1960s and 70s were the golden age for those who preferred their pupils dressed casually. Coincidentally – or not – the proportion of national wealth cornered by the wealthiest 1 per cent was at its lowest since the 1920s and the income gap between rich and poor was relatively stable and narrow. That most important gap – between how long rich people and poor people live – was also the narrowest it had been since the 1920s.

But then came Margaret Thatcher and the seemingly inexorable rise in social inequality – and, on its shirt tails, school uniform. Do those with power think that dressing the have-nots in smart clothes will persuade them that we are all one nation? Are all these blazers and ties a ‘horrible’ and ‘itchy’ means of control that will linger beyond school? Are we, as a society, so frightened of young people that we have to undermine their individuality by making them dress the same? Or are they themselves reaching out for the trappings of status and money that too few of them stand a chance of realising, especially during a recession?

Whatever the answer is, this unchallenged spread of sartorial uniformity is worrying. Remember it was a child who blew the whistle on the emperor’s new clothes. That’s the sort of child we need.