

Three reasons for hope in a new Age of Austerity

Mary Warnock wants no more platitudes about Education as Investment. Instead she welcomes the recession as a chance to shake off the chains of centralisation and introduce a tripartite split between academic, technical and practical in Year 8

At the end of World War II, we lived in an Age of Austerity, and most people did not much enjoy it, especially those who, unlike me, had been adults before the war started and who therefore knew about the luxuries of which they were now, and had long been, deprived. We are about to enter a second Age of Austerity, and we will not enjoy it either. The difference between us and them is that, exhausted though they were, they had hope. Everything was new; social security, education and, soon, the NHS. It was a fresh world.

As educationalists, instead of trying to secure for education some exemption from the cuts, by uttering platitudes about children being Our Future or Educa-

tion as Investment, we should take on the task of reintroducing hope in what may seem a hopeless situation. The cuts will come anyway. We must face the facts that there will be no new money for education; that local authorities will have huge new burdens; and that there is nothing to be gained by proposing expensive new policies. We must work with what we have got. And make the best of it.

It is wrong to think that efficiency economies will be enough. We need radical change to avoid waste, and not only of money, but of the talents of children who all too often find nothing to engage their interest once they have left their primary schools.

In one way we can count ourselves better off than they were in 1945: we have more mistakes to learn from; and centralisation has been one of the biggest mistakes of all. We must, forthwith, abolish targets, league tables, and compulsory curricula. We must, if necessary by primary legislation, untangle education law from anti-discrimination law, so that local authorities, governors and headteachers can regain control of the variety



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of schools that they want to be responsible for.

We cannot hope to go back to the heady days of the 1960s and 70s, when money seemed endless and parents and local authorities tended to trust one another. But if local authorities had more power to allow flexibility in schools, then I believe a new sort of trust might gradually be built up, a trust based on the understanding that we are all in the same boat, and must collaborate with one another or perish.

We could save huge sums now spent on tribunals, for example, if local authorities could devise their own policies with regard to children with special needs and could discuss honestly with parents the manner in which they could try to meet these needs, acknowledging that the proposed solutions might not be perfect, and showing themselves willing to make use of the considerable expertise of parents themselves in a joint enterprise. Confrontation costs money.

We need more teachers properly trained to identify and help children who are floundering in Year 7, when they change schools, monitoring their progress carefully for the whole of this year, and ensuring that they have access to specialist teachers in small groups, or even one-to-one, if they need it. After Year 7, some children might be recommended for special or specialist schools or units. Parents would have been prepared for this by fortnightly progress reports throughout the year, and consultation. This intense concentration on Year 7 might cost money; but it would be saved elsewhere.

In Year 8, education would become tripartite, divided into the academic, (in both humanities, sciences and mathematics) the technical (virtually mathematics and sciences only, perhaps at a less theoretical level) and the practical (including if necessary remedial reading and writing). Each type of course would offer a very different sort of teaching. In maths, for example, it would range from the very practical, geared for use in practical engineering, to the theoretical leading up to pure maths.


This tripartite education might or might not involve children changing schools, depending on local policy and facilities. From Year 8, it would be possible, with careful

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monitoring and parental discussion, to allow children to change courses. It ought to be possible, too, for children to take some practical and some technical subjects, but everything possible should be done to avoid ‘academic drift’, the undoing of the old polytechnics. Parents in particular should be encouraged to think of the technical course as the elite (and in hard economic times this should not be too difficult). The official school-leaving age would remain 18, but there would be some flexibility, in either direction. For example, those fortunate enough to get a proper apprenticeship could leave school altogether at any time from 14 onwards, to take it up. (But in our new austerity era, it is idle to pretend that many apprenticeships will be forthcoming.)

The whole exam system must be changed, if we are to see value for money. There should be one set of exams only, to replace GCSE, taken at the end of Year 9, whose purpose would be to ensure that good standards of reading, writing and comprehension had been achieved over a wide range of subjects, including mathematics, science, history and a foreign language, ancient or modern. This could be examined within the school, by the appropriate subject teachers, and monitored by teachers from other schools (appropriately paid), and sporadically by Ofsted. Thereafter there would be no common exams.

Huge sums of money would be saved by the abandonment of externally-examined GCSE and A-levels, graded tests being substituted, over all the courses, to be taken when the student was thought, by himself or his teachers to be ready. These tests would be externally administered, modelled on those already existing for music, ballet, drama and languages. Admission to higher education would be the business of individual institutions



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which would rely on graded test results and interview.

After Year 9 extra-curricular activities, sports, drama, and music should be largely organised by students themselves though with well-paid professional guidance and instruction, and should be shared between all the three kinds of school courses, and not compulsory. This would not be the time to try to get rid of private education, which would compel local authorities to provide for more children and which might in any case be found to be impossible under the 1988 Human Rights Act. But we might hope both that austerity will cause some parents to switch to the maintained sector, and that private schools will have to share their facilities more widely to retain their charitable status, or else become maintained schools (eg academies) themselves, as some already have.

All these changes would streamline education, and save the money now wasted on the academic bias that still bedevils our educational system. It would motivate children by allowing them to do whatever they do best and enjoy most, and by treating them as grown-up, when they feel that they are so, largely taking charge of their own lives but within a formal structure. These changes, if they could come about, would be grounds for hope.

The greatest reason for hope, however, seems to me to exist already, though readers of the *Daily Mail* and others may be reluctant to admit it. It lies in the increasing numbers and quality of the teaching profession. I know that one still hears horror stories about English teachers who never read and cannot spell, maths teachers who never passed even GCSE maths themselves, biologists teaching physics and Italian specialists teaching German. But they are probably out-numbered by teachers who are truly imaginative and enthusiastic, who deeply care for their pupils, and do everything in their power to further their interests and progress. Nobody who watched the BBC programme, *The Choir*, can doubt what such teachers can do. The hope is that disillusion with the City and rising graduate unemployment will uncover an army of teachers with talents they never knew they had. Then we can be genuinely grateful for austerity.