

Social class still counts for more than top of the class

If more children do well in their exams, more children will prosper – at least that is what the politicians tell the voters. But it is just not true, says **Peter Wilby**, because it was scarcity that made those three As at A-level valuable

It was once possible for politicians to enter election campaigns with no significant policies on education beyond a few vague promises of newer buildings and smaller classes, and a commitment to either selective or non-selective secondary schools. The state then controlled large sectors of the economy – power, water, telecommunications, for example – and carried decisive influence over others, through a variety of bodies with titles such as the National Economic Development Council. Chancellors set interest rates and determined the sterling exchange rate. Trade ministers set tariffs, labour ministers helped to settle industrial disputes, and, at various times and in various ways, governments tried to set wage and price levels.

Now the state has withdrawn from many such areas of economic management, or ceded authority to bodies such as the Bank of England or the European Union. Though governments know they will still be judged on the economy's performance, their scope for influencing it is greatly diminished and they can do little to prevent, for example, the takeover of Cadbury by Kraft or the mothballing of the Corus steelworks on Teesside with consequent losses of British jobs. What they can do, as they see it, is to improve British economic 'competitiveness' by maximising the skills of the population. The main vehicle for achieving this is inevitably the education system.

Two other factors bring education into the electoral arena. First, public services – once presented to the public on a take-it-or-leave-it basis – have been forced to become more consumer-oriented. Increasingly, people expect the same standards of customer service and product quality and the same choices as they find when they buy privately traded goods. Politicians, therefore, intervene more in the detail of public



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Peter Wilby, education journalist and commentator,
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services such as education and health and strive, at elections, to convince voters they can achieve better outcomes than the other parties. This may entail promises that include new structures and institutions, new performance requirements and new consumer rights, including rights to more information, as well as more resources. They also wish to convince tax-payers that their money is well-spent and so usually promise greater 'value for money'.

Politicians thus put themselves firmly on the side of the consumer and tax-payer and take great pains to distance themselves from professionals and practitioners. They want voters to believe, not that MPs and ministers are part of some amorphous state machine, but that they are protectors of consumer and tax-payer interests against an elite that lacks common sense, despises ordinary people and acts according to narrow self-interest.

This accords with wider populist trends in contemporary culture. People who have devoted study and thought to a particular area or acquired direct experience in it are distrusted on subjects as diverse as crime and punishment, justice, poverty, the Middle East, even health (think of the controversy over the MMR vaccine) and the views of 'the man or woman in the street' are respectfully highlighted on innumerable TV and radio news programmes and phone-ins.

Nowhere is this more true than in education, a subject on which everybody thinks that experience as a pupil or a parent entitles them to an authoritative opinion and an area in which claims to professional status and expertise were never as widely accepted as they are in, say, medicine or law. Politicians therefore spatter their election addresses with, for example, promises to root out 'sloppy' or 'trendy' teaching.

Second, and most important of all, the role of education, and particularly secondary education, as a distributor of life chances has been greatly expanded and more widely recognised. Until the late 1960s, the majority of young people left school at the minimum age without any qualifications whatever. A wide variety of manual and clerical jobs required little more than

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basic literacy and numeracy, if that, and an ability and willingness to arrive at work on time and obey orders. Skills, where necessary, were learnt on the job, sometimes through apprenticeships and/or day release. Credentials based on general educational performance – O-levels, A-levels and, more rarely, university degrees – were, for the most part, required for entry only to professional and other white-collar jobs. But for management – and for some occupations such as journalism that are now called (not entirely accurately) 'professions' it was possible well into the post-Second World War era for people to rise from manual or routine jobs (messengers, for example) without possessing a single paper credential.

Now education sifts the population ever more finely into a hierarchy of general competencies, from the lower grades of GCSE to masters' degrees and doctorates. Each qualification level carries access to different segments of the labour market, though the precise value of a particular credential is, to many parents, as obscure as the traditional rules of high society precedence. Not all families understand, for example, that even a first-class degree from one of the newer universities may be worth less, for entry to some careers, than a mediocre degree from Oxford or Cambridge while, despite numerous attempts at reform and standardisation, vocational qualifications remain a thicket of confusing acronyms.

Most parents wish their children to rise as high as possible up the educational hierarchy. Anxieties, and awareness of the value of credentials, are greatest

among middle-class parents and those anxieties grew as economic inequality increased from the 1980s. The penalties of failing to access the more sought-after jobs are immeasurably greater than they were 30 years ago, as are the rewards for accessing the more elite careers. Middle-class parents will fight fiercely to prevent their children slipping down the social and economic ladder and scarcely less fiercely to help them ascend a few steps higher. Many of their anxieties are already evident before and during their children's primary schooling. But the pressure of parental concern – and therefore political concern – falls most heavily on the secondary sector in which pupil performance and acquisition of credentials rations access both to the job market and to further and higher education. Tests and examinations, teaching methods, curriculum, disciplinary ethos and pupil intake all fall under the spotlight.

Politicians, however, face a dilemma. Their usual promises for public services, and their claims for success, concern better results and higher standards – better cancer survival rates, shorter waiting lists for operations, rising numbers passing examinations, smaller classes. These can be said potentially to benefit all individuals, from all social classes and all neighbourhoods, as well as benefiting the nation in, for example, a more skilled workforce or reduced working time lost to ill-health. But education is crucially different. The benefit to a cancer patient of an extra two

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Suppose my child gets, say, three A-level A grades when, under the inferior education regime of the previous government, she would have got three Bs. The benefit to her is quite significantly reduced if many more children in the same cohort also get As rather than Bs. It is reduced still further if those who would once have got As and Bs now get A*s or if some who previously got Cs also now get As.

In the short term, competition for university places and jobs requiring A-levels will be intensified. In the longer term, universities, employers and professions may well raise their entry requirements, so that, to succeeding generations, three A grades are worth no more than three Bs once were. And in somewhat less dramatic form, this is roughly what has happened to A-levels over the past 20 years. Many critics argue that A-levels are less demanding than they once were but, whether that is true or not, it is beside the point. The value of the three A grades lay in their scarcity. If, now my child has obtained them, they are more plentiful, the benefit to her is reduced.

It may be argued that the country and its people will benefit from a more highly achieving workforce. The results may include higher economic growth, more desirable and rewarding jobs and greater resources to finance more university places. But even if this relationship were proven (and it isn't), it is unclear that my daughter will ever reap the benefits from her three A grades that she might have expected. It may also be argued that my family should be satisfied with the more intangible benefits of high educational achievement – self-respect, confidence and so on – but modern politicians are uneasy with such abstractions.

Uniquely among public services, education, as recent governments have designed and marketed it, is a zero-sum game. This point is well illustrated by the continued angst over lack of social mobility. The post-war expansion of educational opportunity allowed

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millions of working-class young people to achieve levels that were unattainable to their peers in previous generations. Yet even more millions of middle-class young people also achieved higher levels than their predecessors. The result is that the gap between middle-class and working-class educational performance has, if anything, widened, and social mobility is at best no greater than it was 40 years ago.

The central fact of post-war social history is that social and economic opportunity now depend on merit as identified by the education system, just as generations of well-meaning reformers hoped it would. Unfortunately, the reformers did not foresee that educational merit would be so closely related to social class, making access to the best careers more, not less, dependent, on birth and breeding.

Politicians are therefore compelled to promise the impossible: ‘better’ results across the board and ‘good’ schools and ‘good’ teachers for everybody. Because some parents will always be disappointed or apprehensive and because some schools will always be less successful than others – mainly, but not entirely, because of differences in their class and ability intakes – opposition parties invariably insist that schools are ‘in crisis’, that a ‘shake-up’ is necessary and that ‘innovative’ schools and ‘new’ practices (the latter usually, in fact, practices that were abandoned a decade or two ago) are required.

Parties seeking re-election may use less dramatic

rhetoric, but nevertheless promise continuing ‘reform’, more action on ‘failing schools’ and ‘tougher’ measures against teachers or local authorities on whom shortcomings can be blamed.

The rhetoric of crisis and failure strikes a chord with a large proportion of the electorate, and particularly with young, aspiring parents, who tend to be among the more biddable voters. Paradoxically, most parents are perfectly satisfied with the school their children attend. But prior concern about what is available at secondary level, subsequent disappointment with children’s results and career prospects, employers’ complaints when school-leavers turn out to be less impressive than previous cohorts with similar credentials (because those cohorts contained pupils who would now continue their education) and everybody’s discovery that what the parties promised last time didn’t quite deliver the expected benefits – all these combine to create an undercurrent of disgruntlement that politicians exploit.

Since the distinction between an election campaign and normal political exchanges is now only a matter of degree – New Labour came to office convinced that no government dare lose control of the political agenda for even a day – schools are subject to a constant battery of political ‘initiatives’ which are supposed to raise standards, eradicate failure, enhance consumer choice, and so on. In an education system that is now largely sold, not on the inherent merits or personal satisfactions of learning, but on promises of advancement in a highly competitive society, all are likely to fail.

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