

Education, the Silver Bullet to Mobility

by Michael Curtis



On February 7, 2017 Betsy DeVos was confirmed as U.S. Secretary of Education by a vote of 51-50 with Vice President Mike Pence breaking the tie vote. She made history because she was the first Cabinet nominee to be confirmed in this way. The question now is whether this contentious and controversial minister will make history by ensuring implementation of her objectives of school choice, charter schools, and vouchers, or as her critics argue, be the ideological advocate of anti-public education by undermining the traditional public school system?

Whatever the answer, it is not coincidental that education is a major political issue in Britain as in the US. In both countries, a host of problems on the issue confront the administrations, the role of government, the issue of funding student loans which inevitably require increased taxes, the nature of the core curriculum. If the main controversy in the U.S. is over charter schools, the schools that are public funded and independently operated, sometimes by for-profit companies, in Britain it is the issues of grammar schools and selectivity. The Trump administration might learn from events in Britain.

British Prime Minister Theresa May is an energetic and ambitious leader, already immersed in the thorny Brexit issue. Her stated objective is for Britain to be the world's great meritocracy, a country where everyone has a fair chance to go as far as talent and hard work will allow. The place to start on her agenda of social change is with the educational system. The dominant aspects of her plan are to end the ban imposed in 1998 on the creation of new grammar schools, and to help poorer children to succeed educationally. To do this she advocates the extension of selectivity in the school system.

The issue of school selectivity is one that affects and is related to other aspects of life, such as prices of houses in areas that are said to have the best schooling, the movement of people from North to South England, and the nature of Britain's industrial strategy. That strategy is important for May who is concerned that the UK is placed 16th out of the world's 20 developed economies in the number of people having a technical education.

But May is concerned with improving and providing a solid ground in academic subjects. She points out that about 1.25 million children attend primary and secondary schools in England that are rated as inadequate or requiring improvement. Grammar schools will help change this.

Grammar schools (GS) are state schools that select students by an examination at age 11, "the 11 plus," taken by pupils in the last year of private or primary school. A number of problems exist over the test and its nature. The test tends to be based on verbal and non-verbal reasoning, and on questions not usually discussed in primary schools, thus favoring children who come from educated families, or have private tutors. Pupils who pass the test go to the local grammar school, while those who do not pass go to the local state school, or what used to be called secondary modern.

In England there are about 160 grammar schools out of 3,000

state secondary schools, and 69 grammar schools in Northern Ireland. There are no state grammar schools in Wales or Scotland. Those students who do not pass the exam can go to the local "secondary modern school," (SMA). In addition, there is the "comprehensive" system which is attended by pupils of all abilities, and became the norm in the 1970s.

Though GS have existed since 16th century, the system today dates from the 1944 Education Act that made secondary education free. The system was based on a division that has important social significance. GS focused on academic studies, and the implication was that many of the pupils would continue on to higher, university, education, and would likely succeed in life. SMS implied that pupils would not go on to higher education, but would go into some form of trade or employment. In addition, there was also provision for a third type of school, the technical school, but few were established.

The main problem is that this selective educational system reinforced class division, differences in income, and social inequalities. As a result, governments in the 1960s, based on ideology of social equality, ordered local authorities to phase out GS and SMS, and replace them with a comprehensive system. Some areas did this, but others, mainly in conservative areas, did not. In 1998 the Labour government, headed by Tony Blair, forbade the establishment of any new selective schools

It is this system that is being challenged by Theresa May, who herself was educated on scholarship at a grammar school, a selective direct grant school, and then at Oxford. Her present Cabinet contains 9 members who attended selective schools. About 11% of Members of the House of Commons attended similar schools.

The basic educational problem is evident. Age 11 is too young to make what is virtually a life choice. What can be termed life chances should not be determined by a test at 11. The

reality is that the proportion of poorer children reaching the necessary level to pass is considerably lower than that of wealthier children. Statistics show that children from households in the top 1% of income had an 80% chance of admittance to selective schools.

For a start there should be opportunities for children to transfer between types of schools. Chances for children coming from working class families is to a considerable degree determined by where they live or the income of their parents. Selectivity is in reality often related to areas with high house price or family wealth. Prime Minister May strongly calls for greater diversity of the system so that it can cater to the needs and abilities of all children.

That policy means more free schools sponsored by universities and independent schools, faith schools, and selective schools. Diversity will result from new selective schools that will be able to become grammars. It also means extending free public transport for poor children to attend grammars. May's main focus is on grammar schools, almost all of which are rated good or outstanding, compared with only 20% overall of state schools.

May therefore wants the ban on selective schools to be relaxed. Her chief point is that they cater for the most academically gifted children. Therefore, her government will support the expansion of good or outstanding grammar schools. What is interesting is that May, a political conservative, is calling for new grammars to take a minimum proportion of children from lower income households. She has called for children from ordinary, working class families to have a fair chance in life.

However, questions remain, both in UK and U.S. In the U.S. the issue is clear, will charter schools improve the quality of education or will they lead to destroying the public school system? In the UK, will the expansion of selectivity and

grammars contribute to social mobility and a more egalitarian society? Indeed, in both countries the fundamental question can be raised, is education the silver bullet to social mobility?