

Abolishing Public Schools: Lessons from research and history

Roger Bullock

Abstract

The British public schools have long been a focus of social and political concern as they are alleged to confer unfair life chances and foster a distinct set of attitudes and assumptions among their pupils. There have been several attempts to reform them and the issue arose again at the 2019 Labour Party Conference with a motion to abolish them, and indeed all independent education. This article reviews the difficulties of implementing such change, highlighting the problem of definition, the validity of the criticisms, the significance of wider social and moral values and the boundary between public schools and the independent sector as a whole. The article concludes that radical change is unlikely but there are options that could be implemented that would make the UK education system fairer and level the playing field with the state system.

Introduction

My first contact with the British public (private) schools came at the age of 11 in 1954 when I won a scholarship to a prestigious day school – King Edward’s School, Birmingham – where I stayed for seven years. My next contact came with my first job in 1965 as research assistant at the Research Centre, King’s College, Cambridge on a study of boarding education directed by Royston Lambert. In the next three years, I lived in 30 boarding schools of all kinds: public, state, progressive, religious and so on.

In 1968, the Research Unit moved to Dartington Hall, Devon to establish the Dartington Social Research Unit and study juvenile justice institutions. The Unit’s research interests subsequently moved from residential education to residential child care and juvenile justice and then on to general child welfare issues. More details of these developments can be found on the website: www.dartington.org.uk.

Public Schools

The term public school emerged Britain in the 18th century when the reputation of certain grammar schools spread beyond their immediate environs. They began taking students whose parents could afford residential fees and thus became known as public, in contrast to local, schools. (This is in contrast to the term as used in the US, where 'public schools' are those that educate all children.) Significantly, they acquired and have successfully maintained their legal status as charities despite their social selectivity.

The problem of definition

The British public schools have long been a matter of public and political concern. But there is a problem of definition; what do we mean by a public school? Is it that the

head teacher is a member of Headmasters and Headmistresses Conference, a national organisation of 296 British and 55 international self-selected prestigious schools educating 236,000 pupils? This is a guide but there is an informal hierarchy of status and while some schools, such as Eton and Winchester, are fully recognised as public school, there are many other schools on the fringes, either fancying themselves as top grade establishments or perceived as such despite denying their socially selective character. There are about 100 top public schools in Britain but this group does not equate with the category 'independent schools' which comprises a much larger and varied group of some 2,500 establishments.

In September 2019, the Labour Party Conference passed a motion to 'abolish private schools'. It was argued, 'help and hoard wealth, power and opportunity for the few'. Hence, their abolition is an issue of 'social justice not social mobility'. It is important to note, however, that this intention was only one in a package of wider reforms that involved abolishing regular tests for pupils and closing down the national inspection organisation, Ofsted.

Attempts at reforming the public schools

There have been many attempts to reform the public schools. A few establishments, like Christ's Hospital, had a long tradition of admitting working class children by virtue of their charitable charters but these ambitions were expanded in the Fleming Report of 1944 which wanted 25% of all public school places to be available on bursaries for children from less well-off families. The Public Schools Commission of 1968 made similar proposals but both floundered due to the rise of more pressing political and economic issues. However, there were some post Fleming 'experiments', such as at Mill Hill, Wycombe Abbey, St George's Weybridge, Rendcomb, Christ's Hospital and, Llandovery College.

Similar initiatives followed the 1968 Commission, such as in North Oxfordshire where state and independent schools - Banbury Grammar School, Tudor Hall, Sibford Ferris and Bloxham – sought greater integration. Another example occurred when the famous public school Marlborough College, funded a project whereby 21 boys from Swindon and Wiltshire were admitted for their sixth form education. A third and more radical innovation in that it involved less able children as well as student and staff exchanges between the self-styled 'progressive' school at Dartington Hall and Northcliffe School, Conisbrough and Mexborough Sixth Form College in the South Yorkshire Educational Priority Area.

The last two of these integration 'experiments' were evaluated (Stagg, 1968; Lambert et al., 1975, Chapter 12) and the researchers concluded that the academic and cultural benefits varied among individual children, social interaction between young people from different social backgrounds was not a problem but social class and cultural differences could be marked and dysfunctional, assimilation hopes were not fulfilled and there was an enduring risk that aspirant rather than needy parents took advantage of the new opportunities.

Why are the public schools a perennial social issue?

Traditionally, public and political concerns about the public schools have focused on three main issues. First, they unfairly increase pupils' life chances by providing privileged access to positions of power in society. Second, they segregate pupils from other social classes, and in some cases the opposite sex, in closed institutions and, third, they form attitudes and assumptions and aspects of personality of their pupils by maintaining an ethos in which some chief aspects is unlike that of state schools or life outside.

But as educational provision and opportunities have expanded in British society and an international youth culture has evolved, how valid are these criticisms today?

Are the traditional criticisms still valid?

Since the time of my visits over 50 years ago, public schools have changed beyond recognition so that today there is less hierarchy, for example in terms of powerful prefects and fagging, there is no beating, participation in the Combined Cadet Force and religious observance are voluntary, there is more contact with the outside world and less congruence between the culture of schools and subsequent settings, such as Inns of Court, civil service, diplomatic corps and London clubs, in which pupils find themselves later in life.

In addition to all of this, many schools are now co-educational, have a broad curriculum supported by superb facilities for arts, sports and science, demand less compulsion and regimentation, admit pupils from all over the world and have more women in senior positions on the staff. So, whatever one's political views, it has to be accepted that many public schools are now pleasant and highly stimulating places.

So, what is the current situation with regard to the traditional criticisms described earlier? Is it still true that public schools grant unfair access to top positions in society? The evidence suggests that this is still the case but is declining as entrants comprise more people educated in state schools and a wide range of universities, more women and more from overseas. Nevertheless, two of last three UK Prime Ministers are old Etonians, as is the Archbishop of Canterbury and Royal Princes and the fact that the proportion from the most prestigious boarding schools has declined does not mean that the rest were educated in non-selective state schools as many will have been to independent ones that are still socially exclusive. There is also a gender issue as the argument focuses mostly on boys with the role of girls' public schools in maintaining social structures less clear. Fifty years ago, a survey by Wober (1971) suggested that the girls' public schools set different criteria for what is expected of pupils but this will have changed as more women enter the professions, politics and commerce. Nevertheless, when women reach distinguished positions in society, such as the two female UK Prime Ministers and the President of the Supreme Court, it is significant that the media still see fit to highlight their grammar school education.

Do they segregate pupils in privileged ghettos? Again, the evidence suggests that that this is so but, unfortunately, most schools in the UK have restricted social intakes, so the question is whether the public school situation is simply more extreme or qualitatively different from the situation found in other types of school.

In the case of the third criticism, the distinct ethos, the evidence suggest that this is still highly significant for British society.

The enduring significance of the public school ethos

The term ethos refers to a system of values embodied in the attitudes, expectations, norms, manners, customs and organisation of any society and which is accepted by that society and is distinct from those of others.

So is there still a public school “type” of person?

The journalist Matthew Parris is in a good position to judge having been born in South Africa and lived in Cyprus, Rhodesia, Jamaica, before coming to study at Cambridge University at the age of 18 in 1967. Twenty-five years later in 1992, he wrote in his regular column in *The Times*;

‘England was new to me. One of the things I noticed, as distinguishing Englishmen from other nationalities, is that it is much more difficult to tell when an Englishman is stupid. In England, someone can be well spoken, genial and impeccably dressed, carry himself with confidence and have the bearing and all the worldly trappings of an able and successful man – yet be scarcely bright enough to walk on two legs. The camouflage is remarkable. It can take months before you even suspect, His wife may not have realised until it was far, far too late.’

James Wood, a scholarship boy at Eton in the 1980s, echoes Parris’s experience in his memory that the headmaster ‘instructed us in how we should comport ourselves in the world. The Etonian, he said, is one who can go into any room, mingle with any social group, be at ease and put others at their ease. He is marked by his air of ‘effortless superiority’. (Wood, 2019).

In the last year David Cameron has explained the dangers when this this ethos is not shared. In his 2019 autobiography, *For the Record*, he recalls his discussions about Brexit with the state school educated Michael Gove. He writes:

Gove told me that he was considering siding with the Brexiteers in the referendum but hadn’t made up his mind. He said, “If I do decide to opt for Brexit, I’ll make one speech. That will be it. I’ll play no further part in the campaign”.

Cameron continues:

I found it hard to believe that what was happening. Michael was a close confidant. Someone I often turned to for advice. Why hadn’t he told me before that this might happen? Of course, I understand his strong Euroscepticism, but he was undecided – and it sounded like a 50-50 call for him – wouldn’t his loyalty be the thing that brought him down on the one side or the other? Not personal loyalty to me, but loyalty to the

team, to the project and to the future of our party and our country. But if he was really going to do this, back Brexit, then I believed him – really believed him – when he said he'd take a back seat.

So how is this public school type created? The socialisation process is lengthy and has several overarching features: total control over lives, especially 'expressive' and emotional areas, education of the 'whole man' based on ideas like '*mens sano in corpore sano*' (a healthy mind in a healthy body) and muscular Christianity, stress on clear values, morality, belief, relationships, taste and modes of self-expression and conformity even if not personally committed, that is loyalty to the group or organisation before self interest.

At a more practical level, these values are reinforced by: long socialisation via family tradition and prep schools, staff and pupils coming from the same social background, the use of hierarchies and the perceived value of the 'up and down' experience whereby pupils start at the bottom and rise up two systems, first at prep school and then at public school. In addition, pupils gain experience of people management with senior pupils identifying closely with staff. Also, key is the repression of emotional feelings, whereby pupils are encouraged not to reveal them publicly and to avoid any personal emotional identification with those they command. In *Notes on the English Character*, E M Forster presents the idea of "the undeveloped (but not cold) heart" that is characteristic of the British, especially men of the upper classes, educated in public schools. Finally, the schools cater for all the pupils' needs and diminish the role of their families, producing the esteemed values of independence, self restraint, resilience and feelings of duty, service, loyalty and 'group before the self', but with dependency on the wider social system of which the schools are part.

Independent Schools

As explained, there are around 2,500 independent schools (often called private schools) in the UK and most of them are not public schools. They educate 7% of the total school population but this varies widely by geographical area. They spend up to 60%-300% more per pupil per year than state schools.

The schools are extremely varied and many have welfare functions, special interests or religious or cultural affiliations. But some are seen as simply buying privilege and there is enduring evidence of small but cumulative benefits for the pupils attending them. Morag Henderson and colleagues (2019) at University College, London, found that after controlling for pupils' social background and previous education, those in independent schools get on average one A level grade higher per subject when compared with their peers in state schools and even more so in subjects valued by prestigious universities. In the same vein, Department for Education data (DfE, 2019) show that maths, physics and computing graduates earn £6,000 a year more than those studying other subject six years after graduation and it is with these subjects many state schools struggle to get teachers and provide state of the art facilities. But, again, change might be afoot, a report in *The Times Educational*

Supplement in November 2019 reported that acceptance rates for university applicants is now much the same for young people from all types of school, at round 87% - with state run academies marginally highest – but this is for entry to all universities and not just Oxbridge or Russell Group establishments.

Abolition of the public schools – practicalities and possibilities

Given the current political situation in the UK, I do not think a full frontal attack on public schools is possible or even likely to achieve much. For one thing, there is the problem of definition, as described earlier. There is also the resilience of the British elite. Income inequality is up since 1979 from 3.5 to 10 ratio of top decile to lowest decile incomes, the highest, or thereabouts, outside the USA, so any major reform has to attack on the assets of the wealthiest echelons of society, via taxes, property restrictions and investment controls.

For radical reform, the social and political mood has to be right, as does the economic viability. I think the moment was lost immediately after the Second World War when a spirit of “we’re all in it together,” combined with much lower levels of inequality, prevailed. Many people now engage in supporting their children and grandchildren to boost their opportunities in life through private tuition, choice of catchment areas, financial support for continuing education, as well as the obvious route of paying school fees. Furthermore, most people, I suspect, would regard using their surplus income to buy education as a fundamental human right.

At a lower level, however, the charitable status of schools could be abolished, making them pay VAT, profits tax and full community charges. This would also remove their ability to reclaim tax on contributions made via gift aid and abolish the right of donors to claim tax relief on their contributions. Prestigious universities and professions could be encouraged (or forced?) to reduce their intake of public school educated applicants and weaken the links between prestigious schools and routes to future employment, for example jobs in the City that are helped by ‘networks’, personal, family and school ‘contacts’ and the ‘old boy network’. Companies and organisations that give school fee payments to employees as a perk could also be penalised.

Would educational standards fall?

One argument frequently put forwards by defenders of the public schools is that many of them are first-class educational establishments and it would be a terrible mistake to destroy high quality for the sake of dubious social engineering. But is dumbing down inevitable? Many Oxford and Cambridge colleges have adopted policies of recruiting a majority of undergraduates from the state sector without it affecting their position in the Norrington table that ranks their academic successes and the reputation of the two universities as a whole remains as high as ever. So, again, the evidence is equivocal.

Would abolition place a financial burden on the state?

The HM and HM Conference say that their member schools save the state £3.5 billion per year, contribute £13.7 billion to the exchequer and provide 303,000 jobs, many of them in rural areas. But there's an academic problem in calculating costs as much depends on whether average or marginal costs are being considered. If privately educated pupils were absorbed into the state system, without the need for extra resources, only marginal costs (the cost of the last admission) would be incurred and these would be very low as the structures and staffing are already in place. If new buildings and staff are needed, then the average costs per year per pupil would apply and the HMHMC figure of £3.5 billion would be nearer the cost to the state.

Abolition of all independent schools

When the abolition of all independent (private) education, the Labour Party policy, is considered, there is the same problem of definition and boundaries. Many schools have worthy welfare aims, e.g. the Mulberry Bush which cares for severely traumatised primary school age children and the Yehudi Menuhin School that gives free training to promising young musicians. Should they be abolished? And are academies and free schools included; they have quasi-independent status, can influence their admission criteria, appoint non-qualified staff, modify the national curriculum and expel pupils relatively easily?

And how about crammers and private tuition?

But unlike the public schools, removal of their charitable status and other benefits would have a big effect because many parents struggle to pay fees and increased costs would put private schooling out of their reach. Private education could also be made less attractive. The old adages 'improve the state system' and 'level the playing field' are probably over optimistic but there could be an impact by offering good alternative provision that is free. This could be especially effective at primary school level, at least in middle class areas, and for 16+ pupils attending sixth form and FE colleges. This would save parents a lot of money, a benefit that has become increasingly attractive to them because of the escalating costs of higher education and post graduate training and of future housing for their children.

Wider social issues

Because education is so important, discussions about its nature cannot be isolated from wider social values and social morality. These impinge, too, on the argument.

Social justice

There is no doubt that private education confers advantages which are perceived by many as unfair. But views of 'fairness' depend on the sort of society you want. If you believe in a free market economy with minimal regulation, some people will succeed and become very rich. And if you believe in individual freedom, the orthodox Conservative Party view is that as long as money is legally earned and properly taxed,

people should be free to spend it as they want – on private education for their children if they wish.

Freedom of choice

The UN and EU social charters on children specify that countries should provide education, but the focus is mostly about the extent of provision and universal access to it. There is very little about freedom of choice in choosing the type of education.

Other non-educational issues

There are some wider political issues that are nothing to do with education. The Treasury say that 1% of the population pay 27% of all income tax and residents in the Elmbridge district of Kingston on Thames pay more tax than the whole of Liverpool – so would a government alienate this group by attacking the way they choose to educate their children? Also, many independent schools, especially in cities, are attached to specific religious or cultural groups and abolishing them might be seen as racial or religious discrimination, raising the question whether a government would want to create difficulties in this area. In the Autumn of 2019, a philanthropist wanted to fund bursaries for white boys from poor backgrounds, a group noted for its poor educational attainments, to attend Winchester and Dulwich Colleges. The schools rejected this offer as it was seen as discriminating against other ethnic groups (Guardian, 2019).

A critical question

A final question relevant to possible reforms of independent education is whether there is a public desire for change among the British people. If so, how strong is it? It is unclear just how interested ordinary people are in education; they want the best for their children but do not seem unduly concerned about the system. Moreover, education was hardly mentioned in the 2019 election campaign and is not a major issue in the new government's programme.

Conclusion

Given all these pressures, it seems that radical change is unlikely to happen in the near future but there are some options that could be implemented quickly that would make the education system fairer and level the playing field.

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The author

Roger Bullock worked at the Dartington Social Research Unit from 1968 until 2003. He is Professor Emeritus of Child Welfare Research at Bristol University and editor of the Coram/BAAF journal *Adoption and Fostering*.