Briefing Paper: Independent Schools after 1945

Speaking at the Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference in October 2017, the chairman of the HMC and headmaster of Leicester Grammar School, Chris King grumbled that 'It is endlessly ironic that UK independent education, one of the most valued and enduring global brands, should be so sneered at in its country of origin.' King went on to demand 'a more collaborative, less aggressive approach' through which state and independent schools can work together for the benefit of pupils not politics. Over the last sixty years politicians and independent school headteachers alike have repeatedly expressed similar sentiments – unsurprisingly, almost always intended to buttress private schools against potential threats. Despite the broadly democratic direction of education reform after 1945, independent schools have remained an entrenched and remarkably stable element within Britain's educational landscape. Rallying after the economic privations of the 1930s the schools not only withstood the post-war challenge from below, as a focus on social mobility and meritocracy shaped modernising agendas but survived the disintegration of empire and with it the decline of their traditional clientele. Far from falling victim to a post-war, post-colonial meritocratic age, numbers of children being taught in independent schools has stayed roughly stable at around 7% of the school-age population.

In 1945 this equated to around 310,000 pupils; in 1959 to 520,000 and in 2000 550,000. Despite moments of intense scrutiny and fluctuations in numbers during the 1960s and 70s, it has never seemed likely that the left's consistent bubbling opposition would succeed in abolishing private education in Britain. Polling from the 1960s onwards suggests more people than not support its continuation, whilst the schools have proved adept at defending their position. At times defensive, at others aggressively expansive, since 1945 independent schools have been proclaimed as institutions integral to Britain's late-colonial project, potential ladders of social mobility, bastions of national heritage, guardians of educational standards, and now, for 21st century proponents like King, a lucrative 'national commodity' (worth almost £12billion p/a) to be enthusiastically marketed across the globe.

The positioning of independent education as a commercial asset able to sustain Britain through the economic ruptures of Brexit is just the latest in a long line of metamorphosing strategies deployed to justify and preserve parents' ability to purchase educational opportunity in Britain. as Patrick Joyce reminds us, despite the nostalgia so often associated with public school tradition, these were always, and remain, market-driven institutions [Joyce, 2013]. Studies of independent, and in particular public, schools have traditionally focussed on nineteenth century origins and expansion [Bamford, 1967; Gathorne-Hardy, 1977; Honey, 1977]. These have uncovered how a, now well documented, gentlemanly code of character, sport, and manners combined to form the basis of these institutions' reputation as nurseries of empire [Rich, 1991; Mangan, 2000]. The public schools not only prepared their charges for elite careers and positions of leadership [Wilkinson, 1964; Weinberg, 1967; Reeves, Friedman et al, 2017] but also were sites integral to the construction of elite masculinities and emotional registers [Tosh, 2004; Hamlett, 2015]. Yet, despite the glut of material on the public schools before 1914, far less has been written on their role after the First World War and even less on the period after 1945, when the schools moved their philosophy away from its traditional moorings in order to meet the challenges of postcolonial Britain [Rae, 1981; Collins, 2002; Mandler, 2006].

Recent efforts to push this narrative into the late 20th century have illuminated the politicking surrounding public school lobbying and reform [Hillman, 2010 & 2012], as well as how school culture shifted in response to the growing emphasis on exam success and the expansion of higher education [Miles & Savage, 2012; Turner, 2015; Peel, 2015]. Yet, these opening excursions serve to highlight the need to examine more closely the place of independent schools in the post-Butler landscape. We know little as to why parents chose to continue to purchase educational opportunity in the era of mass secondary education beyond entrenched stereotypes nor how the composition of independent schools

changed after the 1960s when more students from minority backgrounds began to attend and many schools went co-educational. This latter point also highlights the glaring lack of work on independent girls' schools throughout the period and the need to be more attentive to the differing gendered experiences of independent education and how this prepared individuals for life after school in the late-twentieth century [Graham, 2016]. That many schools retain rich archival collections and tight knit alumni networks makes this a viable and important task within a wider study of post-45 education; as these recent works highlight, we still need better answers to the question: why after 70 years of free, universal secondary education are independent alternatives still so entrenched in the British educational landscape?

Numbers & Status

Agreeing upon a common frame of reference has proved a persistent challenge for those writing about the independent sector. Most straightforwardly, it includes all schools operating beyond the jurisdiction of the state and LEA control. In 1945 this amounted to over 4,000 schools, a figure that had fallen to 2,201 in 2000. Within this field there is massive variety, however. It encompasses single sex and co-educational schools, teaching both secondary and primary (preparatory) level pupils, and ranging from traditional public boarding schools, through day schools, religious institutions, arts schools, to special educational units. The Fleming Committee [1942-44] drew a firm distinction between 'efficient' and 'non-efficient' schools when discussing how to achieve greater integration between the state and independent sectors. Efficient schools were identified as being non-profit institutions, willing to submit their accounts for inspection, and were members of the Head Masters Conference/Girls' School Association (the latter as a means of quality control in terms of teaching).

Within the independent sector, it is the public schools, and more recently private day schools, that have always attracted the most attention. These institutions numbered around 200 in 1945 and 282 today. Many of the leading schools have collaborated to protect their collective interests through a variety of governor and headteacher associations since the mid-19th century. The leading body has traditionally been the Headmasters Conference [HMC], founded 1869, which throughout the 20th century provided a forum for discussion and lobbying amongst the leading boys' schools (public, private, and direct grant grammars). The HMC is now the Headmaster and Headmistresses Conference, although many leading girls' schools are yet to join. Instead, they remain principally affiliated to the Girls' School Association [GSA], founded as the Association of Headmistresses in 1874. There is also the Independent Schools Association [ISA], founded 1879 and now with a membership of around 300 schools; Independent Association of Preparatory Schools [IAPS], founded in 1892 and now representing 670 preparatory schools; Society of Headmasters & Headmistresses of Independent Schools (SHHIS), 1961, which represents independent schools outside of the traditional institutions, those with a notably different educational ethos, specialist arts schools, and schools for children with learning disabilities. In addition, the Governing Bodies of Girls' Schools Association [GBGSA], 1942, and the Governing Bodies Association [GBA], 1944, which amalgamated into the Association of Governing Bodies of Independent Schools [AGBIS] in 2002, admit school governing bodies to membership if their Heads belong to one of the above organizations their members. Since the 1970s the Independent Schools' Council has carried out research on behalf of the sector, working with all schools belonging to the above organizations. These schools account for around 80% of pupils educated privately, meaning numerous private schools continue to run beyond this network.

Pupil & school numbers since 1945

Year	No. of pupils (efficient schools)	No. of pupils (other independent schools)	Total	Number of pupils in Direct Grant Grammars	Number of schools
1945			c. 310,000		
1950	203,843	305,591	509,434	84,891	
1960	293,954	198,146	492,100	110,272	3,825
1970	303,977	109,811	413,788	129,096	2,875
1980	N/A	N/A	423,020	102,175	2,348
1990	N/A	N/A	559,144	N/A	2,283
2000	N/A	N/A	576,948	N/A	2,201
2010	N/A	N/A	511,886	N/A	1,260
2017	N/A	N/A	518,432	N/A	1,280

* Figures for 1950-2000 taken from Brian Simon, *Education and Social Change*; and Department for Education and Skills, *Bulletin: Statistics of Education – Class Sizes and Pupil Teacher Ratios in England*, 1:3 (2003), p. 5.

* Figures for 2010 & 2017 taken from the Independent Schools' Council annual census and accounts for about 80% of the pupils being educated privately at any one time. The total number of pupils being educated in the independent sector in each of these years is therefore between 600,000 and 800,000.

To date much of the historical discussion of these institutions has largely ignored private girls' schools and focussed overwhelming on boys' public schools. As a result, the figures for the numbers of girls in private education is sketchy for the period before the 1970s. The Fleming Committee consciously focussed on boys' schools, taking as its frame of reference the 188 schools that were members of the Headmasters' Conference – 89 fully independent schools and 99 direct grant grammars. Although this meant that over half the membership were in receipt of some public funds, the report's focus reflected popular assumptions that the public schools were largely synonymous with private education in Britain. Within this group there was significant diversity, but all shared several broad common attributes: independence from LEA control, with no state representation of the governing body; the ability to charge fees and freely select pupils for entry from anywhere in the world; most pupils boarded (although with significant exceptions); private ownership of all land, buildings and facilities; many of the older institutions enjoyed substantial endowments.

Historians have used various metrics to measure the gradations within this sector (from fees to sports fixtures) in an effort to establish a hierarchy but this remains ambiguous. Traditionally the nine Clarendon schools (Eton, Harrow, Winchester, Charterhouse, Shrewsbury, Rugby, Westminster, and two-day schools Merchant Taylors' & St Paul's) identified in the Clarendon Report (1861-64) tended to be viewed at the apex of the system and drew their pupils from across the aristocracy and upper middle classes. By the end of the 19th century many Victorian boarding schools (including several revived grammar schools, such as Bedford [1552] and Uppingham [1584]) had become elite institutions in their own right. They drew many pupils from the expanding professional middle class and imperial bureaucracy (e.g. Cheltenham [1841]; Marlborough [1843]; Wellington [1859]; Clifton [1862]). Smaller boarding schools proliferated around the country during the same period, but tended to be far more reliant on local networks to attract pupils or middle-class parents unable to afford the fees at more prestigious institutions [e.g. Ellesmere [1879]; Dean Close [1886]). Regardless of relative status, the majority tended to subscribe to a similar, and well documented, ethos centred on the teaching of classics, muscular Christianity, athleticism, and pupil governance [Mangan, 2001]. Even so, the late 19th/20th century also saw the foundation of several more 'progressive' schools (e.g. Bedales [1893]; Summerhill

[1921]; Frensham Heights [1925]; Gordonstoun [1934]), which sought to combine the privilege and resources of the public schools with more child centred approaches [Neill, 1960; Vaughan ed., 2006; Veevers & Allison, 2011].

Fees

There has always been wide discrepancy in the fees charged by independent schools. In 1938, the most expensive schools (1. Eton; 2. Winchester; 3. Harrow) charged between £210 and £245 p/a; the cheapest under £100 p/a. By 1949 the most expensive charged over £300 compared to around £115 for the cheapest; in 1962, between £460 and £510 at the top end, compared to £250 for the cheapest. Figures are harder to come by for the 1970s but figures are more readily available for the period after 1980:

Year	**Boarding (average fee p/a)**	**Day fee at boarding school**	**Day schools (average fee p/a)**
1980	2,505		1,200
1990	5,934	3,687	2,559
2000	13,341	6,858	5,277
2010	24,144	13,749	10,107
2016	30,951	17,481	12,939

Between 2000 and 2008 fees for independent schools rose rapidly, often with year-on-year increases of between 5-10%. Fees differ significantly depending upon location, with London schools charging around £5000 more than schools in the north of England (£15,897 compared to £10,704).

This period also saw a significant rise in the number of pupils from overseas, although as a proportion of total pupils this represents only a 0.9% increase since 1982 (4.4% to 5.3% of pupils):

1989 – 12,390

2000 – 15,239

2010 – 23,307

2016 – 27,633

In 2000 these students brought in £188,105,400 in fees.

Independent Schools and educational reform, c. 1939-1997

As the 1930s drew to a close, the position of the public schools appeared increasingly uncertain. Criticism from the left had intensified as the decade progressed and then percolated more widely once public school amateurism was blamed for the failure of appeasement and military blundering before 1942 [McCulloch, 25-33, 1991]. At the same time, the effects of the depression left the finances of many smaller schools perilously stretched as enrolment numbers declined. With growing calls, from their critics and the schools alike, for the government to take action, Butler sought to buy time and defuse a potentially divisive wartime issue by appointing the Fleming Committee in July 1942 [Hillman, 238-40, 2012]. The Committee's terms of reference centred on advising on 'the means whereby the association between the Public Schools to the general educational system of the country could be developed and extended' [Fleming Report, 1, 1944]. Its deliberations were to include both the public/private schools and the direct grant grammars. Butler made the terms of reference suitably non-specific to stall debate in the short term; to opponents it seemed to promise imminent action and reform,

whilst advocates were reassured by the committee's composition and confident that any suggested change would only serve to stabilize the schools' position. Ultimately, Butler's manoeuvring ensured very little changed. The public schools were largely excluded from discussions surrounding the 1944 bill on the grounds that Fleming's investigations were ongoing. The Committee only reported its findings a week before the 1944 Bill gained royal assent, by which time most observers were preoccupied with the new tripartite reforms [Simon, 64-5, 1999].

The Fleming Committee's principal recommendations focussed on two central but limited issues:

> Scheme A – Sought to (gradually) end fee charges at direct grant schools in return for recognition of their independent status. They were thus confirmed as an important, influential, and prestigious element within the post-1944 education system, albeit beyond LEA control. The final step to abolish fees was never taken, meaning that the DGGs comprised an awkward assortment of means tested bursary supported pupils and fee-paying counterparts.
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> Scheme B – Aimed to achieve the Committee's central ambition of establishing more effective cooperation between public and state schools. It recommended that 25% of public schools' intake should be reserved for 'qualified pupils' from state primaries, who would receive a bursary (either from the LEA or a Board of Education fund). This proved an unappealing compromise to all parties, although, interestingly, one enthusiastic supporter was Herts' LEA Chief Education Officer, John Newsom (later chair of a subsequent committee on the public and direct grant schools) [Hillman, 239, 2012].

Ultimately, little changed in the public schools as a result of the 1944 proposals. Ellen Wilkinson made some efforts to encourage LEA/independent collaboration; however, this ceased under George Tomlinson, who initially showed only negligible interest and then in the early 1950s stated Labour's fundamental opposition to independent education and refusal to divert anymore public funds from the state sector into the private [Simon, 135-39]. Although the schools had appeared supportive of Scheme B when their financial futures looked precarious, most quickly lost interest once they began to recover after 1945, whilst the financial and political cost for LEAs meant the scheme quickly fell into abeyance [Bamford, 292-93; Hillman, 243-47]. For Butler this was an eminently satisfactory outcome; he later recorded that 'the first-class carriage had been shunted into an immense siding' – where it contentedly sat for the next two decades [Butler, 121, 1971].

With the Conservatives in power for much of the 1950s, the independent sector largely escaped further government scrutiny. In 1953, Angus Maude articulated a popular attitude on the right, depicting private education as an issue of straightforward consumer choice in a field that now promised opportunity to all who deserved it: 'So long as the clever child of poor parents is given a free place in a school which will develop his aptitudes to the full, the parent who is prepared to make sacrifices to provide his child with better-than-average schooling has as much right to spend his money on that as on a better television set' [quoted in Kynaston, 142, 2009]. For Labour, although the TUC and WEA remained staunchly opposed, private education failed to draw much attention beyond a reiteration of basic opposition from the party's modernisers. In *The Future of Socialism* (1956), Anthony Crosland outlined the left's ideological opposition to independent education as 'much the most flagrant inequality of opportunity, as it is the cause of class inequality generally', but, like Roy Jenkins three years later in *The Labour Case*, resisted advocating the abolition of private education because it would represent too great an assault on 'individual liberty' [Crosland, 218, 1956; Jenkins, 1959, 88-90]. Instead, both favoured a process of integration into a new comprehensive sector, which through rising standards would lead to an inevitable decline in demand for independent education. Things started to change in the aftermath of the Suez Crisis amidst *the angry young men's* biting critique of the old school tie and the mounting volume of sociological research that laid bare the education system's ongoing systemic inequalities [e.g. Sampson, 1962; Floud et al, 1956]. In a 1961 essay, published first in *Encounter*, Crosland now called

for radical reform to integrate the public schools into the state sector, an ambition that was included in the 1964 Labour manifesto [Crosland, 1961].

Yet, once Labour entered office, with Crosland installed at the Department for Education, structural reform of the private sector again proved elusive. Once Circular 10/65 had been issued the question of the direct grant grammars became more pressing; however, Crosland remained hopeful that the schools could be persuaded into the state system rather than compelled. A new Public Schools commission was announced in December 1965 under the chairmanship of John Newsom (and subsequently David Donnison) to 'advise on the best way of integrating the public schools with the state system of education'; however, with the Commission working to a two year timetable, Crosland was able to shelve an issue that he had privately decided to be 'strictly insoluble' [Peel, 9-10, 2015]. Subsequently, the Commission's recommendations (published in two reports in 1967 and 1970) appeared intended more to delay any definitive decision (and to placate the party's left wing) than a meaningful attempt at reform [Hillman, 511-31, 2010]. The implications for the direct grant schools were more far reaching, with the Commission stressing that integration or closure was essential to address the fundamental contradiction of retaining state subsidised, selective schools in parallel with the new comprehensive system. Thus, while Crosland's infamous declaration to destroy 'every fucking grammar school' accelerated the process towards comprehensivization, his (and the Labour Party's) resolve to integrate independent schools into the state system proved no more than lukewarm. Amongst Conservatives, by the early 1970s the New Right had fixed upon education as a key battle ground in the political landscape. The publication of the first *Black Paper* in 1969 signalled the launch of a sustained attack on 'the egalitarians' comprehensive mediocrity'. Moving away from his focus on consumerism, Angus Maude now emphasised the importance of choice to protect educational standards demanding 'we reject the chimera of equality and proclaim the ideal of quality' as 'essential to the survival of civilization' [Maude, 37, 1969].

Even when the 1974 Wilson government undertook a sustained attack on the principle of selection – both independent and grammar – success in abolishing direct grant grammar schools was diluted as 71% elected to become independent or close rather than enter the state sector (119 of 174 became independent). The end of grammar school education in much of England provided a significant boon to the independent sector, which, in addition to incorporating many of the leading direct grant grammars, started to attract back the type of parent who after 1945 had chosen to educate their children at a local grammar school rather than pay fees [Floud et al, 43, 1957; Peel, 9, 2015]. Even efforts to roll back state funds still being allocated to boarding schools to educate the children of government and military officials serving overseas foundered on David Owen's opposition. In consequence, the proportion of children being educated in private schools rose from 4.2%, its lowest point in 1977, to 6.2% in 1981 (an increase from 402,000 to 516,000 – although this proportion varies depending upon how one categorizes DG pupils) [Turner, 214]. Labour's failure to overcome independent schools' organized opposition to reform, coupled with evermore vocal Conservative support and rising pupil numbers, emboldened John Rae to gloat that in 1979 the independent schools were at their strongest at any point since the war [Rae, 1981].

With Thatcher's governments determined at the very least to uphold the status quo around independent schools and where possible to expand their role in secondary education, the 1980s became a decade in which the independent sector assertively proclaimed its resurgence and celebrated its contribution to British education. Even as admission numbers dropped during the early-80s recession years, the introduction of the Assisted Places scheme helped insulate many struggling schools against the rigours of the market place, so enthusiastically being embraced elsewhere, until numbers steadily began to increase from the mid-1980s onwards (by the time APS was abolished in 1997, it had funded around 75,000 pupils attending 355 schools). As a result, Labour's mounting threats (the 1983 manifesto promised to end all tax and other government subsidies, revoke charitable status, charge VAT on fees, as well as end all forms of academic selection in school admissions) met with a bellicose response from

the Conservative right (Rhodes Boyson described the proposals as 'an envious assault that could end in a totalitarian society of repression and hatred of learning, culture and individual ability') and public school headmasters (Brian Rees, HM of Rugby, proclaimed that the majority of people in the country supported the continuation of Schools so central to the national heritage) [Peel, 11-13]. All this seemed a far cry from Butler's intention that the public schools could be quietly preserved. A variety of voices now unabashedly asserted parents' democratic right to choice and excellence when selecting their children's school as justification for fundamentally undemocratic institutions [Simon, 478, 1999]. Recovery was distinctly regional, however. Pupil numbers rose steadily in the South East but schools in the old industrial heartlands found it harder to maintain intakes. Many schools responded successfully by going co-ed, or by keeping fees low to attract 'grammar school types'. Across the sector, it was increasingly recognised that long term success depended upon maintaining high academic standards and modernizing beyond the amateurish, moribund stereotypes aggressively being critiqued by historians popular on the right, such as Martin Wiener and Corelli Barnett [Wiener, 1981; Barnett, 1986]. Improving exam results and increased university attendance seemed to vindicate in the eyes of many the claim that since the demise the grammars, the independent sector was the sole upholder of standards in British education. Once Tony Blair had shifted Labour's position to a more conciliatory stance towards independent schools after becoming leader, the ground was set for New Labour's more active courting of the HMC in the late 1990s.

Life in the schools

Little changed inside the schools themselves in the fifteen years after 1944. In boys' schools, school culture shifted slightly as younger masters returned from war and some reforming headmasters attempted to modernise school facilities and outlook; however, major changes largely waited until after the late-1950s when the schools were once again forced to rally in defence of their position. With the figure of the English gentleman undergoing widespread flagellation, traditional career paths on the wane, decolonization accelerating, and increased competition from the grammar schools, the most forward thinking (and financially secure) institutions acknowledged that to retain significance in the changing educational landscape they must reappraise core elements of their ethos [Collins, 90-111; Mandler, 197-215; Turner, 193-219]. As they became less preoccupied with their role as nurseries of empire, so they placed less emphasis on traditional values [Mangan, 1986]. The focus fell instead on the need to retool elite young men to withstand emerging challenges at home, whilst seizing new overseas opportunities beyond the limits of empire. This did not entail the abandonment of their traditional values but rather their evolution to ensure relevance for a generation that did not take imperial status for granted and appeared intent on questioning the orthodoxies of their parents [Jeppesen, 146-48, 2017].

These changes gathered pace following the Robbins Report as university attendance became increasingly common expectation for independent school pupils. It offered new opportunities to differentiate oneself in an age of universal secondary education and thus to access elite careers, which increasingly demanded a degree (although the grade mattered less) as a basic requirement where the school certificate had previously sufficed. By the early 1980s, 42% of pupils leaving HMC schools continued onto university (59% into higher education – albeit a figure that was significantly lower in independent schools outside the HMC) and by 2000 this figure had risen to 92%.

In the wake of B. M. Spinley's 1953 study, which found distinct similarities of character between public school boarders and 'slum children', many of the schools slowly started to change [Spinley, 1953]. More money was invested in modernising facilities and classrooms. Greater emphasis and energy was put into pastoral care, whilst reforming headmasters, such as John Rae at Westminster and Dennis Silk at Radley, sought to break with some of the traditions that had remained central to boarding school life since the mid-19th century [Hibbert, 1997; Rae, 2011]. With the expansion of co-education at many

boarding schools from the 1980s onwards and a steady rise in fees dormitory and study facilities continued to improve and now form a fundamental selling point in any school prospectus.

The project aims to bring together these various strands to offer new insight into the place of independent schools within the British education system in the late-20th century but, crucially, to situate these institutions alongside other types of school rather than treating them as entirely separate. Parents' decisions to send their children to independent schools were always made within this wider context [Pahl, 254, 1972], making it essential to explore these choices as part of the broader narrative of post-1944 mass education.

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