

SUNDAY Mirror COMMENT

There ARE no pluses to 11-plus

THIS government has a proud record of improving the education of our children after almost two decades of shameful Tory neglect.

Starting with the primary schools, standards began to rise as class sizes fell and teachers were given a sense of purpose after years of being kicked around like playground footballs.

At the other end of the age range our sixth form colleges are now among the best in the world. And overall abilities have risen with improving literacy and numeracy.

An impressive record indeed. Until now.

Last week's five-year plan for schools announced by the Prime Minister and Education Secretary David Blunkett was a long step backwards.

It might not quite have signalled a return to the Dark Ages. That was when the vast majority of children were condemned at the age of 11 to the educational desert of the secondary moderns, while a tiny elite sailed into the grammar school system with a passport to university and a professional career.

Our report today on the astonishing effect success and failure in the 11-plus exam had on the lives twin brothers Dave and John Hill - men with identical IQs - is an unanswerable indictment of the divisive and invidious selection system that existed before the comprehensive revolution swept Britain.

And it is because a new element of selection has wormed its way into Labour's new policy initiatives that they are such a disappointment.

Almost half our secondary schools are to be labelled "specialist" and allowed to pick pupils who have shown an aptitude for music, science or whatever the speciality is.

They will get extra money from the all-too-limited funds available.

And how will this affect the schools that are not chosen?

They will be shunned by ambitious parents, the better teachers will join the exodus as they become "sink" schools, offering no hope to their pupils and relying on the willingness of private firms, successful and private schools, to turn them round.

Top up the pops

IT didn't take long for Hearsay, the made-to-measure pop group, to learn the rules of the music industry.

The five youngster may have been snatched from obscurity by TV bosses making the Popstars programme.

But while they may be eternally grateful - and rich - the three girls and two boys soon realised that right now it's the television moguls who are likely to pocket most of the cash.

So they have demanded - and received - extra. Not much, admittedly. But stick around, it's early days yet.

By CHRIS McLAUGHLIN Political Editor

A DEEP Cabinet split has opened over Government plans for new elite schools.

Education Secretary David Blunkett is furious at Downing Street's bungling of one of Labour's top election policies.

He believes the Prime Minister's famous pledge to make "education, education, education" a call sign for New Labour has been wrongly hijacked into a vote-losing "selection, selection, selection" backlash.

At a special Labour spring conference in Glasgow yesterday Mr Blunkett won huge applause when he publicly distanced himself from disparaging remarks made by Tony Blair's Press secretary Alastair Campbell against "bog standard" comprehensive schools.

He told delegates he did not recognise the term and parents should be proud of the comprehensive tradition in Britain.

But Mr Blunkett's determination that the education system requires a new revolution, with the best schools getting more Government cash, has dismayed Cabinet colleagues.

Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott, Commons leader Margaret Beckett, Foreign Secretary Robin Cook and Health Secretary Alan Milburn are understood to be angry that the wrong message has been sent to voters so close to the expected election in early May.

There are fears that the plan - not yet discussed by the full Cabinet - smacks of a return to selective education, where the brightest pupils get the best facilities, teachers, and fast track academic grading.

Ministers have privately expressed concern to Number 10 about the potential electoral damage among Labour's core voters of a return to a pre-comprehensive two-tier education system.

Mr Blunkett believes Mr Campbell badly mishandled one of the fundamental planks of the Government's bid for a second term.

The Education Secretary had made a firm pledge not to re-introduce grammar-style selection when he told voters: "Watch my lips - no return to selection on the basis of ability."

The new Labour plan suggests pupils will be chosen for a fresh category of specially-funded schools on the basis of aptitude. Mr Blunkett sees the programme as a necessary modernisation of the comprehensive system rather than a return to elitism which divided grammar schools from secondary moderns.

The proposal for specially funded schools is contained in a Green Paper unveiled last week by Mr Blunkett. But, while it is still at a consultative stage, it took Cabinet Ministers by surprise. They believe the timing was damaging and the presentation disastrous.

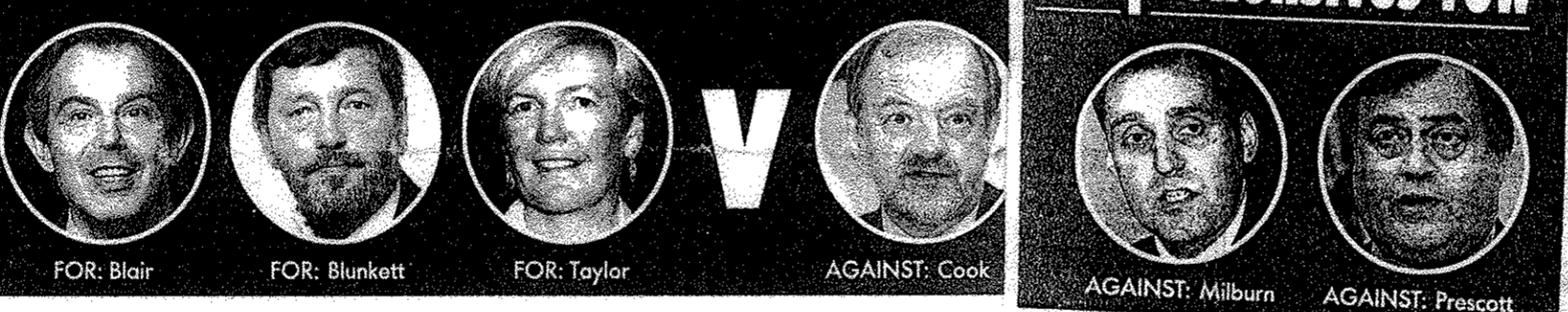
Mr Blunkett tried to repair the damage yesterday when he made it clear that he did not share Mr Campbell's view that comprehensives were "bog standard".

The new proposal has the strong backing of Mr Blair, who sends his children across London to schools which have selective admission policies, and Chief Whip Ann Taylor.

Ministers are understood to be pressing for a full Cabinet debate on the proposals, with some predicting they will be dropped if Mr Blunkett is moved in a reshuffle after the election.

THE GREAT EDUCATION DEBATE SELECTION, SELECTION, SELECTION, ON, ON, ON, ON, ON, ON

Cabinet divided over 'bog standard' comprehensives row



FOR: Blair FOR: Blunkett FOR: Taylor AGAINST: Cook AGAINST: Milburn AGAINST: Prescott

Fight for comprehensive victory

DAVID Blunkett knows that secondary school "selection" is wrong. Classifying 11-year-olds as academically gifted or mediocre also-rans - and therefore labelling some children as "failures" - undermines confidence and destroys the will to succeed.

As a result, it wastes our greatest national asset - the talent of our people. That is why Blunkett has been a passionate supporter of comprehensive education.

Yet last Monday he announced a new policy which brought selection back into Britain's classrooms. Almost half of our secondary schools are to be labelled "specialist" and allowed to select pupils who are thought to have an aptitude for the subject in which they specialise.

Blunkett would not have willingly introduced a policy that he openly despised four years ago - the U-turn was forced upon him. As I listened to him defend the return to selection, I realised, although the voice was his, the words came from advisers to the Prime Minister who had never believed in comprehensive education.

Being forced to forswear his beliefs must be a painful process, so I felt almost sorry for David Blunkett. Almost, but not quite. Even if he had not been allowed to do what he knew to be right, he should have refused to introduce a policy which he knows to be wrong. But all is not yet lost. The new policy was set out in a Green Paper - meaning the final decisions are yet to be taken and the battle for comprehensive education is far from over.

All the evidence confirms comprehensive schools best meet the needs of young people - and Blunkett knows it. Real comprehensive schools, with a genuine all-ability intake, encourage all their pupils to achieve their full potential. And, as a result, they get the best out of almost all their students. So it is hard to believe that the Government will win many votes by condemning as "bog-standard" the schools which successfully educate a majority of the nation's pupils. For the millions who have benefited from a comprehensive education and the parents who have rejoiced in their success, it is time to speak up for what they know to be right.

By ROY HATTERSLEY Former Deputy Labour Leader

Q&A

Education and Employment Secretary DAVID BLUNKETT answers five important questions. 1. What is the schools revolution all about? We've made huge improvements in our primary schools, with the new literacy and numeracy hours. But there is still too big a gap between good and bad secondary schools. We want to make sure all youngsters use their talents fully. 2. What are specialist schools? They are secondary schools with extra facilities and teaching in a key subject, as well doing the national curriculum. There are 500 at the moment - there will be 1,500 by 2006. 3. Is this the end of comprehensives? No. This is about modernising comprehensive schools so that every pupil has a better chance. Comprehensive schools should not be about sameness; they should bring out the talents of every single child. 4. Why do specialist schools get more money? They do get an extra £123-a-pupil each year, but a third of that is to work with other schools. For example, language colleges help older primary schools to learn a foreign language. 5. If they can select by aptitude, isn't that the same as the 11-plus? No. Nearly all specialist schools are all-ability comprehensives. Only about seven per cent choose by aptitude for a tenth of their pupils. Aptitude is about potential, which may not have been fully developed in the primary school.

How 11-plus divided twin brothers with the same IQ

LAST week Tony Blair announced the most radical shake-up of education since the late 1950s. It heralds an end to the so-called "bog standard" comprehensive by pledging a return to more selective schools. For most of today's younger generation the two-tier Grammar School (Secondary Modern system) is history. But for two brothers a return to a selective system rings alarm bells - because one exam at age 11 altered their lives forever.



JOHN HILL'S STORY

AGE: 55 IQ: 126 QUALIFICATIONS: No formal qualifications JOB: Retired carpenter SALARY: On retirement, £250-a-week (take-home) HOME: Self-built one-bedroom cottage in Sussex PARK: Secondary Modern, Brighton

MARITAL STATUS:

Divorced with two sons

I WAS extremely nervous when I sat the 11-plus and, to be honest, I went to pieces. After I failed the 11-plus I started at a secondary modern in Brighton but, a year down the line, I was still doing the same kind of lessons I had been doing at primary school. The teachers at Queens Park just did not push you. It was in quite a rough area, and the teachers spent a lot of their time just controlling the class. I don't think I got any encouragement at all as far as academic things went. When you were 15 you went and got a job and that was it. That was the end of your education. The next chapter was either you got a job or you were unemployed. In the first year of leaving school I had between 11 and 13 jobs. After that I went into carpentry, starting my own business. I was never out of work. I excelled at what I did and I was a good businessman. I could do all the paperwork. I had never thought much about my IQ until I had a car crash ten years ago. I injured my head and I had to have tests by doctors and psychologists. I got an IQ test paper back and Dave had a look at it. His first words were 'Bloody hell, you've got the same IQ as me.' Thinking about it, Dave would never have gone on to be an academic if he had gone to the same school. He just would not have had the chance to excel. None of the teachers would have taken an interest in him. At primary school I had always been good at maths and geometry. But after the 11-plus I never had the option to develop those abilities. As soon as you enter a secondary modern school the teachers assumed you had no academic ability and so would never push you in that area. It is too young an age to make that assumption. Given the chance I could have excelled at many subjects. Had I gone to a comprehensive my life could have been very different. I could have had the option of going on to do A-levels, going to university, maybe even becoming an academic like Dave. I have enjoyed what I have done, but my options would have been far greater. As it was, as soon as you entered the secondary modern that was pretty much it.

DAVE HILL'S STORY

AGE: 55 IQ: 126 QUALIFICATIONS: BA, MA JOB: University lecturer, University College, Northampton SALARY: £35,000-a-year HOME: £300,000, four-bedroom home in Brighton EDUCATION: Westlain Grammar School, Brighton, Manchester University, Sussex University

MARITAL STATUS:

Separated with two daughters

THIS is what I remember from the day I heard I passed the 11-plus. We lived in a working class area in Brighton and my family never ate out. But that day my mum treated me. Here I was in a restaurant with mum. She had my results in her hand. I passed but John failed, as did my elder brother, Roger. They both went to secondary moderns. In the mornings I put on a smart green uniform and headed off to my middle-class grammar school where they told you to reach for the stars. I don't think John even had a uniform. It was jeans and scruffy shirt. That about summed it up. The older I got, the more politically aware I became, the more wrong I thought it was. When I think what was expected of me at grammar school compared to what was expected of John or Roger it makes me very angry. You were labelled at an early age, as if one was a sheep and the other a goat. I got into Manchester University where I studied modern history and politics but I felt like an alien. Every-one else - just as at my grammar school - was middle class. During my career I have come across many young people who did not develop academically until their middle teens. If they had not been at comprehensives they would not have stood a chance. They would have left school and gone into a traditional working class job. They would never have had a chance to fulfil their potential. The grammar school/secondary modern system just typecasts kids. One half is groomed for professional life the other for manual jobs. Education should be about widening children's horizons - not labelling them at 11. My elder brother Roger is a postman. He also greatly enjoys painting. He baulks at being described as a postman who paints. But the reality is I get paid £35,000-a-year and he gets £140-a-week. Because I went to university my disposable income is about six times what his is. I am now an education lecturer and I am ashamed of what is being planned for schools. The Government wants to go back to, I am absolutely gutted. Where you have selection, the sink schools just sink further and the privileged schools just become more privileged.