A classroom revolution

The Conservatives' plans to change Britain's deeply flawed education system may be the most interesting idea in this election

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THE general election due in Britain on May 6th is not the one David Cameron was chosen to fight. The opposition Conservatives made him their leader in 2005 after a barnstorming speech delivered without notes to their annual conference. His pitch: that he could persuade the electorate to trust him with public services and offer tax cuts too, by "sharing the proceeds of growth". It was a formula worthy of an earlier young, centrist, opposition politician: Tony Blair, who in 1997 led Labour to victory after 18 years of Conservative rule.

Now there is nothing to share: taxes will have to rise and public spending fall. But still Mr Cameron is reprising Mr Blair. In 1997 Mr Blair memorably said that his priorities were "education, education, education". In the run-up to this election, education reform is the main, perhaps the only, broad and deeply thought-out proposal from his self-styled heir.

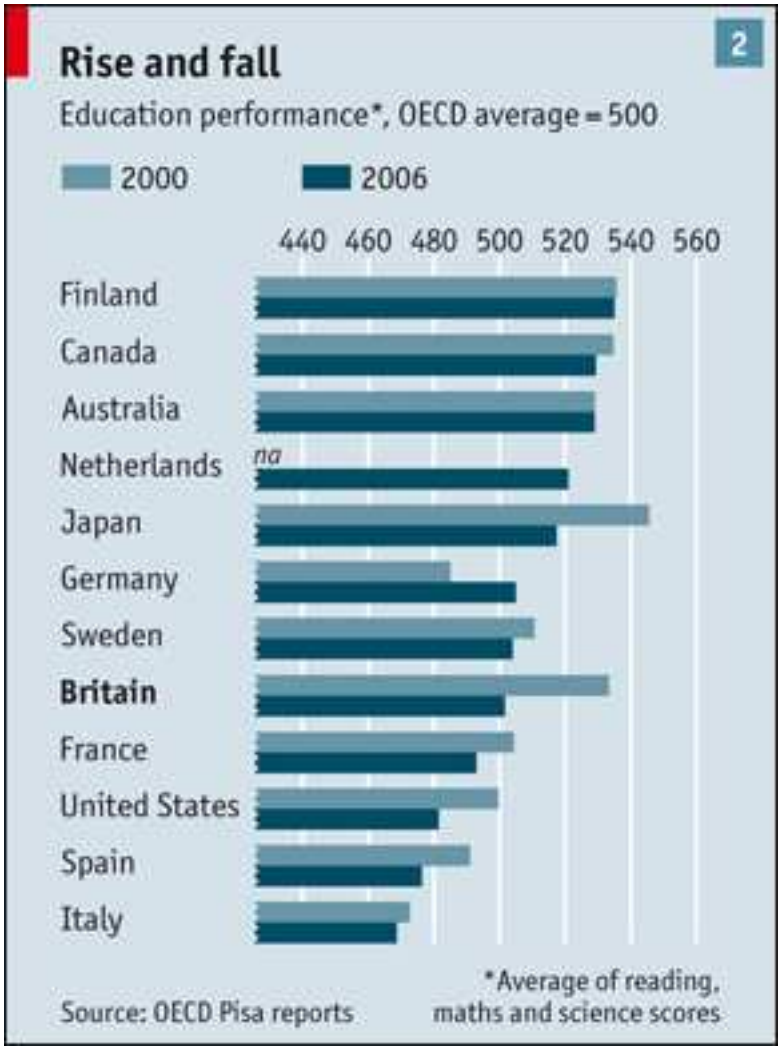
In 2007 Mr Cameron appointed Michael Gove, a close ally, to the schools brief. Soon after, the pair began expounding plans to import market reforms from, of all places, Sweden. This is not the only country where government-funded schools may be privately run: non-profit groups have been running state-funded schools in the Netherlands for the past nine decades, and more recently many American states have passed "charter" laws funding limited numbers of new independent schools. But social-democratic Sweden is a useful exemplar for a right-wing party which wants to reassure centrist voters that it has no plans to dismantle the welfare state.

And Sweden's system is more sweeping than most. In 1991 a rare right-wing government passed a law allowing not only charities, religious organisations and groups of parents but also businesses to open schools and get as much state money per student as state-run ones. When the law was passed, private education was almost unknown in Sweden; since then more than a thousand of these "free schools" have opened, and 12.5% of 11-16-year-olds attend one. This is the sort of revolution the Tories are now proposing.

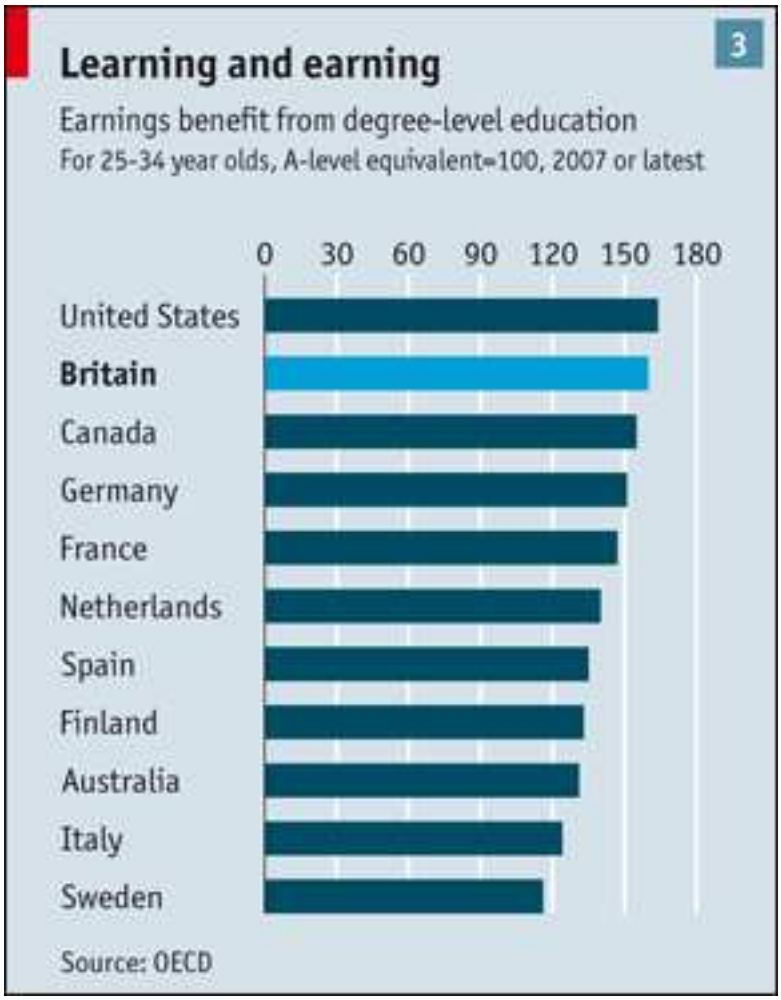
Turning schools around matters both for economic growth and for social justice. Britain is an unequal place, with income disparities higher than in most rich countries (see chart 1). It is a rich country where 4.8m adults and 1.9m children under 16—a sixth of all of children—live in workless households; where four in every 100 girls under 18 get pregnant each year; where even during steady economic growth a tenth of 16-18-year-olds were neither studying nor working. And a child's chances are strongly shaped by the prosperity of the family into which he is born.

Schools are hardly the sole cause of these woes, yet British schools tend to make matters worse. Although the current Labour government has doubled spending on

schools since coming to power in 1997, pupils are falling behind their counterparts in other rich countries. Their recent showing in the tests of 15-year-olds' reading, mathematics and science skills carried out by the OECD, a rich-world think-tank, has been sobering. Between 2000 and 2006 Britain tumbled down the OECD's rankings in all of them (see chart 2). Though the pricey private schools attended by a mere 7% of children are mostly outstanding, state schools are often mediocre. According to the OECD, their quality is more variable than in most other countries, too, and poor children are very likely to end up in the worst ones.



Stoking middle-class parents' concerns is the simple fact that education matters even more for a child's life-chances in Britain than in most other rich countries. Its universities form a steep hierarchy, with Oxbridge at the top, so national exam results really matter. And in such an unequal society, the financial returns from education are very high (see chart 3).



Labour's failure

When Mr Blair declared education his priority in 1997, his chief intention was to satisfy concerned middle-class parents. That meant offering them free of charge the choice and quality available in the private sector. Parents who chose private schools were seen as evidence of the state's failure to offer something sufficiently good.

In order to drive up standards and inform parents' choices, he turned to tools inherited from the Tories. They had beefed up the schools inspectorate and brought in a national curriculum and a series of tests that state-school children of various ages must take, publishing the results. Secondary schools were set targets for GCSEs, the exams taken by 16-year-olds. Those that failed to get enough, or that fell short in inspections, could be taken over or closed.

Where these education-assessment methods have led in primary schools was described in the Cambridge Primary Review, an independent inquiry that concluded last year. It found that since only reading, writing, mathematics and science are tested at the end of primary school, they squeeze out other subjects like history, geography and the arts. "We bought our house because it's right next to a primary school inspectors say is outstanding," says one parent. "But when we visited, we found out that in the final year children spend most of their time on test-drill."

Meanwhile secondary schools switched pupils from harder subjects to easier ones in the chase for good exam results. The number in state schools studying the core subjects of history, geography, languages and the sciences to age 16 has fallen dramatically since 1997, with a rise in easier-to-pass subjects such as media studies and psychology. Teacher-assessed courses in subjects like sport or “travel and tourism” are given a spurious equality with traditional exams in government figures, and hardly anyone fails them.

Grade inflation has occurred across the board. Officially, 80% of children leave primary school now at the expected standard in reading and 79% in mathematics, up from 63% and 62% respectively in 1997. About 70% of 16-year-olds get five good GCSEs or the vocational equivalent, up from 46%. More 18-year-olds take A-levels, the university entrance exams, and they get far higher grades: 26.7% of all entries receive the highest grade, up from 16.3%.

The government takes these soaring results as evidence of ever-rising standards. Independent experts disagree. One group of academics in Durham, who test random samples of pupils leaving primary school each year, find only a modest rise in English and mathematics before 2000, and none since. Its analysis of GCSEs and A-levels is no more encouraging: the tests have become so much easier that a student of the same ability could expect to get half a grade higher now than in 1997.

The lack of a solid official exam currency means that those who need to know what young people have learned must look elsewhere. Some of the best universities now use their own entrance exams to pick the most promising out of hordes of straight-A applicants. Private schools are increasingly abandoning GCSEs for the more demanding independent versions aimed at the international market, so that their pupils can stand out from the crowd.

As for the private-school customers whom Mr Blair wanted to win back, there are more now than in 1997, despite fees that have doubled in real terms, and the share of parents who say they would send their children private if they could afford it has risen to well over half. Private out-of-school tuition is more popular than ever, as those who can afford to do so pay to fix deficiencies in their children’s education.

The Brown row-back

Mr Blair never changed his mind about the importance of parental choice, but he never managed to persuade his party’s left wing either. As his majorities shrank, it became harder to push through such policies. By the time Gordon Brown took over as prime minister, the Labour Party had started to talk of middle-class pickiness not as evidence of a problem, but as the problem itself. Struggling to exercise choice within the state sector was now seen as unfair middle-class snaffling of a limited resource at the expense of the poor.

Last year the rhetoric hardened significantly when the official who oversees school admissions described some parental manoeuvrings as a “form of theft”. He was talking not only of lies, such as applying from a false address, but also of tricks such as renting close to a desired school and moving there temporarily around application

time. Unpopular schools were fine, it now seemed, so long as middle-class children had to attend them too.

The central problem was that, though parents could exercise choice in theory, supply did not increase in response to demand. “Parent groups are encouraged to come forward to their local authority,” says the education department in its guidance on new schools, “where local provision is insufficient to meet their needs.” But only two “parent-promoted” schools have opened. (Two more are in the works.) Parents in Birkenshaw, a Yorkshire village, want a new secondary school to replace their middle school, which is slated for closure. Their request has been rejected on the grounds that it would “undermine” the (distant) schools their children would otherwise have to use.

Swedish inspiration

Labour’s manifesto still talks about parent power. In their version, parental ballots could be held and local-government officials would have to sack head teachers or hand schools over to be run by more successful ones, if that was what parents said they wanted. But it adds up to very little. Real parent-power is what the Tories are proposing, in their plan to let parents set up brand new state-funded schools. (Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland all run their own schools, so the Tories’ writ would run only in England.)

Will it work? The evidence from other countries is broadly positive. Swedes in general approve of their new schools, and the parents who patronise them are satisfied too: nine in ten say they are happy with their children’s education, compared with under two-thirds of parents with children at state-run schools. Studies have found that they have better results, and also spur improvements in nearby state-run schools. The system as a whole responds better to parents’ wishes, too: if local authorities try to close a much-loved small rural school, parents simply apply to open their own one. When officials realise that the hoped-for efficiency savings will not materialise, they back down.

It is hard to draw general conclusions about America’s charter schools because laws differ so much from state to state, but Caroline Hoxby, an economist at Stanford University, has found a similar positive “competition effect”. And the Netherlands, where 70% of children attend independent state-funded schools, comes well above average in the OECD’s ranking.

Many worry that the Tories’ plans, for all their benefits for the middle-class, would offer little to the downtrodden. The Conservatives counter by saying that the new schools would have to abide by the old admissions rules, with no interviewing of applicants and no preference for able students. International evidence is reassuring. A study in Sweden in 2003 found no indication that low-earning parents were less likely to pick free schools than richer ones. America’s charter-schools are mostly in deprived areas, and most of the pupils they teach are black and poor.

There is plenty of interest in setting up Swedish-style free schools in England, says Rachel Wolf of the New Schools Foundation. Miss Wolf, a former adviser to Mr Gove, set up the independent think-tank last year to campaign for greater freedom in state

schooling. She has heard from around 450 groups, nearly half of them teachers keen to improve education in poor areas. Many of the best American charter schools are run by teachers who joined the profession via Teach for America, a programme that places ambitious graduates in tough urban schools. Teach First, the English version, seems likely to be an equally fruitful source of new-school entrepreneurs.

Kunskapsskolan, a Swedish for-profit company that runs more than 30 free schools, is also interested, even though the Tories would not allow schools to be run for profit. Indeed, it will soon be running some English schools no matter who wins the election: in September it will open two "academies"—semi-independent state schools created by Labour to replace failing schools, and overseen directly by central government. As a brand, English schooling is still very strong, says a spokeswoman for Kunskapsskolan. Running schools in England would help the company drum up business elsewhere.

The Tories hope that by taking the power of veto over new schools away from officials, they would end the zero-sum game in which a good school place for one child means one fewer for others. The biggest constraint will be the supply of teachers. Coaxing high-calibre graduates into the profession is always difficult in the country where the canard "Those who can, do; those who can't, teach" was coined, and financial services, law firms and the like pay so much more. Graduates are now applying hand over fist to teacher-training courses, as other jobs are scarce, but the bonanza will not long outlast the recession.

Perhaps Daddy knows best

The Conservatives also intend to tame grade inflation by giving control over exam-setting and -marking to universities, who have a natural interest in keeping results informative. And they say they would insist on having the results of different types of exams reported separately, so that less demanding qualifications do not drive out better ones.

Creative destruction

One piece of evidence from Sweden suggests both a challenge and an opportunity for the Tories, however. This was a study finding that, though free schools pushed up standards in neighbouring state-run ones, the competition effect faded over time. The researchers speculated that this was because few state schools closed when independent schools opened. In these straitened times in Britain, there is no money

for new schools to be run alongside half-empty old ones. So schools could be in for a fruitful bout of creative destruction—and the Tories for a pitched battle with the teachers' unions.

The result of the election is now looking too close to call. A series of televised debates that give Nick Clegg, the leader of Britain's third party, the Liberal Democrats, equal billing with his Labour and Tory counterparts, seem to be providing a big boost to the Lib Dems. That makes Mr Clegg a possible kingmaker, and means that the Tories are hurriedly looking for ways to work with a party that often seems a more natural fit with Labour.

That means closer scrutiny of the Liberal Democrats' plans than is usual. The party's manifesto pledges do not suggest much common ground with the Tories on education—parent groups could "be involved" in setting up new schools, but the local authorities would still have the whip hand. And the Tories are "naive", says the Lib Dems' schools spokesman, David Laws, to think that parent power by itself would deliver improvement: schools must be accountable to a new regulator, and government must be able to ensure that some new schools go where they are most needed—namely, where parents are least likely to agitate for something better.

On the other hand, Mr Laws is critical of Labour's record of centralisation and grade inflation. And he makes some market-friendly noises: he is "keen" to see new providers of state education, "passionate" about choice and competition, and would like to see all schools have more freedom over such matters as curriculum and teachers' pay, rather than just the new ones, as the Tories envisage.

Even if the Lib Dems could work with Mr Cameron, it is not clear that he would have either the nerve or the authority to face down angry teachers. Yet his party's plans would tackle the biggest cause of Labour's failure to improve state schools: the bureaucratic grip on the power to open new ones. The preferences of those on the receiving end could finally inform decisions about what to teach, and how. Just finding out what would make England's disgruntled parents happy would be a big deal. Using the choices of motivated ones to drive up standards for all would be a very big deal indeed.