

Getting You Thinking...

Cherie's aide in attack on private schools

Millar demands they should be stripped of charitable status

BY GABY HINSLIFF

Chief Political Correspondent

CHERIE Blair's former closest aide launches a scathing attack today on parents who pay for private education, warning that by buying privileged schooling for their children they damage the chances of others.

Fiona Millar, who officially left Downing street last week, said private schools should be stripped of their charitable status and state school pupils given preference over fee-paying students with the same grades when applying for university, as they were likely to have had to work harder.

She added that adults who had been privately educated and had only mixed in narrow social circles often "find it quite a shock to the system" to mix in normal life.

Her comments, in an interview with BBC1's *The Politics Show* to be screened today, will make uncomfortable listening for Labour Ministers who have had their children privately educated, including the Secretary of State for Constitutional Affairs, Lord Falconer, Trade Minister Baroness Symons, and Chief Secretary to the Treasury, Paul Boateng.

They are also likely to be used against her former bosses: Tony Blair was



'I don't see why the private sector should be subsidised when state schools are underfunded'

Fiona Millar

privately educated at Fettes, Edinburgh.

Millar - speaking in her private capacity as a governor at Gospel Oak school in north London - says wealthy parents who withdraw their children from state schools make the job more difficult for mainstream teachers.

"A thriving comprehensive school would benefit children from all backgrounds and all areas; there are

parts of London where there's little "buying in" from what you describe as the elite into the system," she said. "That has a knock on effect for the children in the schools that are left behind."

League tables, which rate schools on only exam grades were an "artificial way of looking" at what inner-city heads were achieving, she added, in a further swipe at government policy.

Millar and her partner, Blair's former director of communications Alastair Campbell, have made a point of sending their three children to state school, and she plans to use her new freedom to defend the cause of state education.

Asked by interviewer Martin Jacques whether independent schools should retain their charitable status, which helps keep fees lower, she added: "Certainly not. I don't see why the Government should be subsidising the private sector when there are so many state schools facing funding problems."

The Government is reviewing charitable status, although it is unlikely to be scrapped; it is more likely independent schools will be made to demonstrate that they contribute to public good. Millar admitted she saw little likelihood of an assault on independent schools, adding: "I think it's extremely unlikely for any Government to tackle that section of Middle England by getting rid of private education."

Asked about university admissions, which the Department for Education and Skills is reviewing, Millar said she did not favour positive discrimination, but added: "There is a case for saying that a child with three grade As from an inner-city school should have a preferential chance of getting into one of the top universities than a child that has three As from a school where they have been in a class of 15 and had endless resources."

The child from the inner-city school would have had to work harder, showing initiative and "learned a lot more on the way" to get the same results, she said.

Private education arouses deep passions within Labour, and many MPs and wider members will be cheered by Millar's intervention.

The Department for Education and Skills last night refused to be drawn into the row: "Fiona's views are Fiona's views and everyone is entitled to what they think," said an aide.

However, Tory education spokesman Damian Green, who will outline Tory plans to improve parental choice in schooling this week, said: "This is old-fashioned class warfare of the sort Tony Blair would have us believe the Labour Party has grown out of."

"Fiona Millar wouldn't be making these points if she wasn't angry at the state of far too many of our schools."

Source: *The Observer* (5/10/2003)

State School? I'd Rather Beg.

BY STEPHEN CONDRON

A SENIOR Conservative angered teachers last night when he said he would rather beg than send his children to his local state school.

The comment by Eton-educated Oliver Letwin threatened to overshadow his leader Iain Duncan Smith's closing speech to the Tory conference in Blackpool.

The Shadow Home Secretary told a fringe meeting: "Middle-class parents with money end up getting their children

into good schools. In Lambeth, where I live, I would give my right arm to send them to a fee-paying school.

"If necessary, I would go out on the streets and beg rather than send them to the school next to where I live. What about the other parents in Lambeth who are forced to use the state schools because they don't have the money? We need to give them a choice as well."

Under Tory plans, parents would get vouchers for the amount normally spent on state pupils to pay towards private fees.

Mr Letwin said he would consider

sending his ten-year-old daughter Louisa to a state school in Dorset but would go private in London.

The school he was referring to is believed to be Lillian Baylis School in Kennington.

Headteacher Gary Phillips said: "It is very upsetting for both children and parents to be told that their school is no good when they know full well that it is."

Mark Lushington, an NUT spokesman for Hackney, said: "Mr Letwin's comments are simply silly. If he wants to beg, can I suggest that he goes somewhere other than Hackney?"

Source: *The Metro* (9/10/2003)

Look at these articles

1. List the main points
2. In groups, discuss the role of private education.
3. Make a for and against list
4. Consider the following:
 - a. Should private schools be banned?
 - b. Should state students get preferential treatment over private students

Introduction

As we have seen, state-funded formal education is a fairly recent development – for the vast majority of the history of education, schooling has been provided by private, fee-charging institutions. These types of institutions remain a popular choice amongst those who can afford them, and there are some 2,000 independent schools in Britain. Private schooling therefore forms an important part of education provision, and we must consequently consider the topic in any discussion of the sociology of education.

 **What implications does the existence of private schooling have for the sociology of education?**

The terminology surrounding private education can be confusing. **Private schools** and **independent schools** mean the same thing – fee-charging institutions which are not under the control of the state (hence *independent*). This means, for instance, that these schools don't have to teach the National Curriculum – which is a legal requirement within state schools. They do, however, have to register with the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) – the government department in charge of education. They also have to conform with certain regulations – for example, hygiene and punishment.

The majority of the funding for private schools comes from the fees they charge (which can be up to £19,000 a year) – however it is common for ex-students to carry on paying schools after they have left in the form of gifts and endowments (a recurring yearly payment).

 **Why do you think that people carry on making donations to their school after they have left?**

The 200 most famous independent schools, such as Eton and Harrow are known as **public school**. A school is classed as a public school if it is a member of an elite body called the **headmasters conference**. These are usually boarding schools and are known as public schools because they have traditionally prepared their pupils for important public offices.

Entry to independent school is normally by selection. Pupils usually have to pass some sort of entrance examination. Many children attend preparatory (or “prep”) school that prepare their pupils for entrance to public or other independent schools. Some children even attend pre-preparatory schools, which prepare them for preparatory! It is, therefore, possible for students to attend private institutions for their whole education:

- Pre-preparatory – ages 4-8
- Preparatory – ages 8-11 or 13
- Public or other independent school – 11 or 13 – 18

In theory, entry to an independent school is not restricted to pupils from any particular background, but the level of fees can be quite high. In 1999 the average charge was £5,540 – out of the means of most people. If we compare this with the amount that state schools receive per student (£2,372) it is not surprising that the independent sector is able to provide better resources and smaller class sizes for its students.

The Popularity of Private Schools

During the 1980s independent schooling became increasingly popular. This growth slowed in the early 1990s, however, at which point 7% of all pupils in Britain attended an independent school – rising with age (18% of boys and 15% of girls attended these schools).

Academic Success

Although independent schools educate only 7% of all school children in England, 39% of students in the top 13 universities have come from private schools. This academic success is the result of many factors. First of all, many independent schools select their pupils by examination and only those who are likely to be successful at GCSE and A Level are admitted.

Another major reason for the success of pupils in private schools is the extra money available. As outlined above, independent institutions usually have at least twice the amount to spend on each student than state schools. This means that classes in independent schools tend to be much smaller than those in state schools, so that pupils can receive much more individual attention from their teachers. Private institutions also have more money to spend on facilities, so pupils are more likely to have access to the most recent and up-to-date materials and they are much less likely to have to share textbooks. Also, of course, if pupils are attending a boarding school they are more likely to be supervised throughout the day and the evening. This, of course, makes homework much more likely to be completed.

Private Schools and Social Status

There is a strong link between independent schools, Oxbridge and the top jobs in society. Pollard and Adonis (2000) have researched people in “high-ranking” jobs and have found that this 7% who attend independent schools account for:

- 7 out of 9 senior generals
- 33 out of the 39 most senior judges
- 120 of the 180 officers graduating from Sandhurst
- Half of the 18 permanent secretaries running Whitehall

According to the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), 75% of pupils from independent schools went on to take up professional or managerial jobs, while only 40% of state school pupils reached that level.

The effect of a private education is perhaps most obvious in the people who run the country. Prime Minister John Major's first cabinet in November 1990 demonstrates this with 19 out of 21 cabinet members having attended independent schools.

 **What are the implications of this data for the sociology of education?**

Views on Private Schools

Private education has been, and remains, a hotly debated topic. Supporters of the system argue that in a free society

parents should have the right to choose their children's education. They should have the freedom to spend their money as they see fit and if the result is better education for their children, so be it. Parents who choose private education usually put "academic reasons" at the top of their list and also include better discipline, superior facilities, smaller class sizes and better teachers. They see independent schools as giving their children a better start in life.

This point of view is called an **individualist** stance – as it focuses on preserving the rights of the individual. In contrast a **collectivist** stance would place more emphasis on the need to create a fair and meritocratic society. The collectivists highlight a number of key concerns over the existence of private schooling...

Elite Self-Recruitment



Make two lists, comparing how the "hidden curriculum" might operate differently in independent and state schools.

Independent schools do not simply offer academic advantages to their pupils. Young people are also socialised differently in some respects at independent schools. The emphasis in such schools is often on qualities such as leadership. Many of the extra-curricular activities, such as the emphasis on team games ("Rugger", etc) have the effect of developing self-confidence and a desire for leadership in pupils. In short, students in independent schools – particularly public schools – are socialised into an expectation that they will become the future leaders of society.



What evidence have we already covered to support this position?

Furthermore, private schools also provide ex-pupils with a valuable network of contacts. This is sometimes known as the "old boy network" or "old-school tie" network. Sharing the same background and experiences as those who occupy positions of power is said to help individuals gain entry into powerful positions in society. This process is known as "**elite self recruitment**". Those at the top are said to recruit people who share the same background as themselves. So, in Britain, only the very wealthy can afford to send their children to the most expensive public schools. This gives their children an advantage academically and makes it more likely that they will obtain a place at Oxford and Cambridge, for example. This in turn makes it more likely that the children of the wealthy will themselves obtain high status and well paid positions.

Creaming

Another objection that some people have against independent schools is that they tend to "cream off" the best pupils by examination, and so take only the most able pupils. It could be argued that this reduces the number of talented pupils attending state schools. As a consequence, their results to suffer and they are less likely to attract the most able pupils.

Another consequence of this process is that parents of independent school pupils will not push for improvements in the state system. The parents of independent school pupils tend to be wealthy and influential people. They tend to be the kinds of people who would be able to exert pressure on the government, local councils and school governing bodies to make improvements. If their children are not attending state schools this is less likely to happen and so improvements in the state system won't happen because the rich and powerful have no interest.

Charitable Status

One final objection to the private schools is their charitable status. By taking this status, schools do not have to pay tax on their earnings. According to an article in *The Guardian* by Nick Davies this charitable status is the equivalent of the government giving private schools an extra £1,945 per student per year. This is £200 more per pupil than the government gives to state primary schools.

The Assisted Places Scheme

The Assisted Places Scheme (APS) was first introduced by the Conservatives in the 1980 Education Act and aimed to provide parents with financial help with the cost of tuition fees in certain independent schools (note: this is only partial help, and parents must still pay some of the fees out of their own pockets). In launching the scheme the Secretary of State for Education, Mark Carlisle, said that the intention was...

"To widen the availability of the type of school to parents whose children are now being educated in the state sector ... restoring to bright children of less affluent parents a high quality academic education...the APS constitutes support for the parent and pupil rather than the school".



The aim of APS was to allow children of less well-off parents the opportunity to go to private schools. Can you criticise this position?

By 1985 something like 17,500 students were using the scheme. It was extended during in 1988 Education Reform Act and by 1990 the number had rising to 34,000 – costing £50 million.

These costs are relatively small when considered in the context of the overall spending on education. However, some have criticised the principle of APS as it spends money that would otherwise be destined for the state system – it makes the private system (which predominately still serves the higher social class) stronger and weakens the state system.

Furthermore, Department of Education allowed the schools to carry on selecting students on the basis of aptitude – which disadvantaged children from working class backgrounds. It has been argued that the people who benefited from APS may well have used the private sector anyway, and were just receiving "top up" help with the expense of doing so.