

Pass it on, boys and girls, pass it on – politics, education and race since 1981

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Introductory note: subjunctive history

'Thinking about what might have happened,' says a character in *The History Boys* by Alan Bennett, 'alerts you to the consequences of what did.' Another character replies: 'It's subjunctive history ... The subjunctive is the mood you use when something might or might not have happened, when it's imagined.'

This article consists primarily of imaginings. What, it asks, might have happened in British society, and in Britain's four education systems, if James Callaghan not Margaret Thatcher had won the 1979 general election? Specifically, what might the last three decades have looked like in relation to education, and to the development of Britain as a multi-ethnic society?

Rampton

'We told Rampton,' reflected and rejoiced people of African-Caribbean heritage in Britain in 1981, 'and Rampton told the world.' Anthony Rampton's report, *West Indian Children in our Schools*, had been warmly welcomed by the newly re-elected prime minister, James Callaghan, and by the secretary of state for education, Shirley Williams. The report's essential message was that England's education system was institutionally racist. Day by day in schools, it declared, a perfect storm of customs and policies worked against the interests of Black people and to the advantage and benefit of white people. This was an uncomfortable message for Mr Callaghan, who had not said anything remotely similar in his celebrated Ruskin speech in 1976. But his positive response to the Rampton report, supported and reinforced by Mrs Williams, laid the foundations for one of the most exciting and sustained revolutions in education and society that these islands have ever seen.

Rampton's document was the interim report of a committee of inquiry set up by Mrs Williams in 1979. Her decision to create the committee had been informed by a report published in 1977 by the House of Commons select committee on race relations and immigration; by the damning accusation in 1969 by E J B Rose (co-founder of the Runnymede Trust) in his magisterial *Colour and Citizenship* that African-Caribbean children were 'a source of bafflement, embarrassment and despair in the education system', and that they 'often presented problems which the average teacher was not equipped to understand, let alone to overcome'; and by a seminal essay published in 1971 by a young teacher in London named Bernard Coard, who had been born in Grenada.

Coard's essay had generated much passion and determination amongst parents and community activists. Its title and sub-title were a vivid summary of its central thesis and polemical tone: 'How the West Indian child is made educationally subnormal in the British school system: the scandal of the Black child in schools in Britain'. The education system, said Coard, 'is a powerful way to deny the Black child self-empowerment and identity'.

A racist, said the Rampton committee, is someone who 'believes that people of a particular race, colour or national origin are inherently inferior, so that their identity, culture, self-esteem, views and feelings are of less value than his or her own and can be disregarded or treated as less important'. The committee said further that 'very few people can be said to be entirely without prejudice of one kind or another', and that in Britain, 'due in part at least to the influence of history, such prejudices may be directed against West Indians and other non-white ethnic minority groups'. A well-intentioned and apparently sympathetic person, it added, 'may as a result of their education, experiences or environment, have negative, patronising or stereotyped views about ethnic minority groups which may subconsciously affect their attitudes and behaviour. Consequently people of African-Caribbean heritage were seen as 'them'. or 'these people', or 'immigrants', not really British... Such attitudes and behaviour, the committee declared, reflected what it called unintentional racism.

The next stage

Anthony Rampton suggested to Shirley Williams, following the publication of his interim report, that the committee of inquiry should be chaired by Dr Bhikhu Parekh, at that time a political philosopher based at the university of Hull. Dr Parekh, for his part, was about to take up the post of vice-chancellor at the University of Baroda in India, but he agreed to stay in Britain for a further three years in order to steer the committee through to its conclusion. The report for which he was the guiding figurehead, *Education for All: the future of multi-ethnic Britain*, was published in March 1985.

Education for All placed its recommendations for education firmly within a discussion of British history and culture more generally. The choices facing Britain, it said, 'may be summarised as static/dynamic; intolerant/cosmopolitan; fearful/generous; insular/internationalist; authoritarian/democratic; introspective/outward-looking; punitive/inclusive; myopic/far-sighted; chauvinist/patriotic.' It is the second term in each of these pairings which evoked the kind of Britain that *Education for All* proposed. 'People in Britain have many differences,' it said. 'But they inhabit the same space and share the same future. All have a role in the collective project of fashioning Britain as an outward-looking, generous, inclusive, deliberative democracy.'

Possibly and deplorably, the United Kingdom might become divided and fragmented among its four nations, and between northern England and southern, and between shire and urban authorities. There might be hostility, suspicion and wasteful competition – the politics of resentment. The prevailing mood might be one of aloofness and apathy towards the rest of the world, accompanied by an idealised and self-deceiving preoccupation with Britain's island story, the story of 'a precious stone set in the silver sea'. There might be profound divisions by culture, religion and history, with no joint deliberation between people of different religious or philosophical beliefs, or between people with different perceptions and collective memories of the past. There could be a sharp increase in socio-economic inequality, combined with punitive and impatient attitudes towards people surviving on benefits or low pay, and increasing disregard for human rights and civil liberties. In this wider context of intolerance, meanness and sense of decline, encouraged by sections of the media, the institutional racism identified in the Rampton report might become ever more powerful and more pervasive, with schools in the vanguard of white supremacy.

Instead, Britain could develop as what *Education for All* called a community of communities. It would be at ease with its changing place within world society and with its own internal differences. In such a Britain there would be real determination to develop each separate country, region, city or borough as a community of interacting and overlapping sub-communities; a readiness to share and to attend to conflicting perceptions of national and world history; dynamic contributions to world culture in a wide range of the arts, in science, medicine and technology, and in philosophical, political and moral theory; and resolution and action to remove racism and xenophobia in their various forms – colour/cultural; individual/institutional; behavioural/attitudinal; overt/subtle. At the centre of this cultural transformation, inspiring it and inspired by it, there would be a transformation of the UK's educational systems.

Transformation

And so, by and large, it turned out. The great debate that Mr Callaghan had called for in his Ruskin speech led to deliberations and strategies to close gaps in educational outcomes between young people from different communities and backgrounds. Antiracist policies developed by the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA), initially devised by Berkshire County Council, were combined with policies on gender, class and disability and became widespread, and ILEA went from strength to strength. Its centre for urban educational studies (CUES) was nationally influential and a journal which it helped to start, *Race Equality Teaching*, was read avidly in virtually every staffroom in the land. The development programme for race equality (DPRE) pioneered in the London borough of Brent was rolled out throughout the country, funded by Section 11 of local government legislation created by the Wilson government in 1966. There were successful efforts to prevent the marginalisation of Muslim young people in schools, and to develop strong and confident British Muslim identities.

These changes and improvements relating to equality in the education system were supported by the introduction of a core curriculum throughout the UK (not just in England), with national, regional and local components and variations; by the introduction of political literacy and philosophy for children (P4C) within the framework of integrated social studies programmes for all pupils between the ages of 5 and 16; by major reforms in systems of inspection and accountability which involved schools engaging in, and being trained to engage in, professional peer-evaluation; a huge investment in the continuing professional development (CPD) of teachers; and strenuous and successful efforts to remove Britain's historic but deeply damaging splits between the arts and sciences, and between theory and practice, and academic studies and vocational. These various changes and developments took place in private fee-paying schools, in so far as such schools continued to exist, not in publicly-funded schools only.

Perhaps most significantly of all, education ceased to be a political football, both nationally and locally. Hitherto, policies and decisions had all too often been based on the career aspirations of individual politicians rather than on patient and objective research, and on professional expertise. Although much less party-political than in the past, education did of course remain part and parcel of Britain's structures and processes of deliberative democracy. How exactly this was achieved by the Callaghan/Williams partnership in the 1980s is the subject-matter for another article.

Concluding note: 'pass it on'

Alan Bennett's play ends with Hector, played on stage and in the movie by the great and now alas late Richard Griffiths, urging his pupils to keep faith with what he has taught them. Slightly adapted, his words are as follows: 'Pass the parcel. That's sometimes all of you can do. Take it, feel it and pass it on. Not for me, not for you, but for someone, somewhere, one day. Pass it on, boys and girls. That's the game I wanted you to learn. Pass it on.'

Appendix: what really happened, and didn't happen

The quotations from the Rampton report in this article are entirely accurate. So are the quotations from E J B Rose and Bernard Coard. Rampton was sacked by Margaret Thatcher shortly after the publication of his interim report in 1981 and he was replaced by Lord Swann. *Education for All* was the name of the real report produced by Swann in March 1985, but the account of it here is of *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain*, published by Profile Books for the Runnymede Trust in 2000, not of the Swann report. Similarly the 'quotations' from it here are from *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain*.

Bhikhu Parekh took up the post of vice-chancellor of the University of Baroda in 1981 but later returned to the UK and, amongst other things, chaired the commission which produced *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain*. The Inner London Education Authority did not go from strength to strength in the 1980s but was abolished by Margaret Thatcher. The development programme for race equality (DPRE) in Brent was similarly destroyed by the Thatcher government, aided by the *Daily Mail*.

The UK still has four separate education systems. There is still no core curriculum. There are still very many private fee-paying schools. It is still the case that education is a party-political football, with policies and decisions apparently based on the career aspirations and electoral calculations of individual politicians rather than on patient and objective deliberation, and on professional expertise. Education for race equality is still a struggle.

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