A tripartite system of secondary schools puts the child first. The different kinds of schools are to be designed to suit different children, not different social groups, or the incomes of their parents. No child should be forced into an academic education which bores it to rebellion, merely because that type of grammar school education is considered more socially desirable by parents.

However hard Ellen Wilkinson tried to persuade the country that technical and secondary schools would be as good as grammar schools, people saw them for what they were — a hierarchy that further entrenched the status quo. Education is ultimately a political issue, for it is concerned with a child’s relationship to the world, both then as a pupil, and as a future adult. In 1945, for all its optimism, England remained a jealous and divided nation, forever looking over its shoulder to see what others were doing. It still didn’t believe in equality — what an Englishman was looking for was an equal opportunity to be unequal.

The first sign of trouble came quickly. Having abolished fees for Grammar School pupils in 1945 there was, quite unexpectedly, an increase in the number of children being sent to independent schools. From the moment the middle-classes realised that a grammar school education no longer implied a social or financial superiority, and that henceforth the doctor’s daughter might find herself sitting next to a gifted labourer’s son, the middle-classes started to forsake the state sector in increasing numbers.

It was in the early planning for the secondary modern school, the schools being expected to take some three quarters of all English children, that Wilkinson came closest to creating the kind of progressive learning environment anticipated by John Dewey. Education to many a Labour politician was the way of escaping a blue-collar job. Secondary modern (from here on called ‘Modern’) schools were encouraged to create within their walls an image of an idealised home, a haven from the pressure of society — a place far removed from the deadening routine of industrial work that it was feared such children would all-too-soon be forced into. It seems that behind the Modern school stood the ghost of the lost village for, in this confusion of philosophies, Labour’s idealism sought to protect the child from the ravages of capitalism. But these schools were soon to be let down by both political parties. From the start of the new building programme a third more money was allocated to the building of new Grammar Schools than was allocated to Modern schools. Then, in 1953, actually with R. A. Butler as Chancellor of the Exchequer, the capital cost of Modern schools was cut by a further quarter. Take a
walk around schools built at that time and you will note the startling differences. By 1965, twenty years on, four fifths of Modern school buildings were deemed inadequate, a third of them had no science laboratory, a half no gymnasium and a quarter no library. Additionally differences in the quality of teaching were stark; a youngster attending an average secondary school had a reading age of seventeen months greater than a mate in a slum area.

Depending on the part of the country in which a child lived he might have a one-in-two chance of a Grammar School place, or only a one-in-six chance. Not only was a grammar school entry a lottery of place, it was based on a form of testing that was soon recognised to have at least a 14% inaccuracy factor – one child in seven was misplaced. Psychologists, other than Cyril Burt, argued that if the tests were taken on five separate occasions, rather than one, it would be far more accurate. As this would cost 3/9d (eighteen new pence) rather than 9p (four new pennies) administrators deemed it too expensive. Parents were instantly suspicious, and spent much money on extra tuition to make sure that their children were well groomed to outwit the testers. Public antagonism grew even more vociferous as it was noted how quickly youngsters slipped into performing simply at the level expected of them.

The impact of the Eleven Plus Exam was frequently devastating. One headmaster recalled how a father told him about his son; “We always thought, his mother and I, that he was a bright laddie. I have a shed and in my spare time I do a lot of carpentry. He used to come in and help me, and then he started making things for himself. He made a bookcase, and he bought a blueprint and rigged up a wireless set for himself. Pretty good reception, too. We bought encyclopaedias from a traveller that came to the house and we encouraged him to read them; and he did. He used to spend a lot of time in winter evenings reading about science”. The father stopped, and then after a pause added almost apologetically, “Oh well. Maybe we built up our hopes too high”. He smiled, a slight, sad smile. “We always think your ain bairns are pretty good. Better than they are really, I suppose”. Parents who have watched the miracle of birth and growth are briefly informed on the basis of a single number that the miracle is over. Their children are just ordinary, below average in I.Q. The magic has fled, and the wonder gone out of life. To understand England today is to remember that very many of the grandparents of today’s so-called ‘difficult’ pupils were just like that young boy; they had been regarded by their parents, and by themselves, as have-beens. It wasn’t their fault; it was the result of the system that was flawed from the start.
The early 1960s were for Britain a rare moment of opportunity; post-war prosperity had created a more homogenous, more socially ambitious and optimistic people, yet culturally and educationally the country still remained divided by an education system designed at other times to serve a very different kind of people.

The provision of Technical schools represented an even sadder story to the slow development of the Modern school. To make the tripartite system work there should have been half as many technical high schools as there were grammar schools. In fact, by 1963, there were just 204 such schools in the entire country, with an average of six grammar school pupils to every technical school pupil. Over 40% of local authorities didn’t even have a single technical school, and that in the land which had sired the Industrial Revolution. It wasn’t that the aims for secondary education set out in 1944 weren’t eminently worthy; they included the formation of moral and ethical standards, the intelligent use of leisure, and the development of social skills needed to support family and community (“families can’t be built upon half-baked personalities”). However, the opportunity to develop such skills was mightily constrained by the kind of school the child attended. If it was the grammar school, then the development of the academic curriculum severely limited the development of social skills, while if it was the Modern school the near impossibility of pursuing academic studies to any depth deprived most youngsters of the opportunity of progressing much beyond the lifestyle of their fathers.

The school-leaving age was raised from fourteen to fifteen in 1947. Yet, in a way hard to appreciate in 2006, that wasn’t the actually the end of a youngster’s formal education. There existed, until 1959, the enforced conscription of all young men on their eighteenth birthday into two years of National Service. The War with Germany having ended, Britain still needed large numbers of servicemen to confront the expansionist aims of communism. For two years every able-bodied young man was trained to fight and, most significantly, trained in skills that would keep the Armed Services operational — radar technicians, radio operators, car mechanics, cooks, navigators, boatwright’s, even teachers. Once ‘demobed’ they went back into ‘civvy street’ with marketable skills, and a sense of discipline so that, with the ending of National Service to replace such skills, it became imperative to strengthen the formal school system. While the Grammar Schools and Public Schools sought to incorporate some of the social skills that National Servicemen had appreciated — the Duke of Edinburgh’s Award Scheme, Outward Bound courses and shortly thereafter the Voluntary Service Over-
In 1945 Wilkinson had taken pride in claiming that the Modern school would not be a watered-down version of a grammar school curriculum. She had no wish to see its new curriculum constrained by external examinations. Modern Schools wanted ‘to do their own thing’ and in their own way. In pre-war days there had been only one form of public examination, the School Certificate, examined in two parts, Higher and Lower. Although it examined individual subjects a pupil had to pass in every subject at a single sitting to be awarded the Certificate. There were no retakes. To get ‘School Cert’ you had to be all-round smart. In 1938 when only 18% of fourteen-year-olds were still in school, only 60% of those who survived to sixteen even achieved the lower certificate. By 1951 School Cert was replaced by the General Certificate of Education (GCE), which differed in one fundamental way to the School Certificate, awards were given for each pass, not for a group of subjects. Failing, say, two subjects in a group of six, the pupil could retake the two he had failed six months later and, if successful, then claimed that he ‘had six GCEs’. There were limitations to both schemes, but traditionalists argued that the new GCE exam opened up opportunity for ‘grafters’, and did not really define those who were all-round smart.

GCE was explicitly designed for grammar school pupils, generally assumed to be the top 25% of the ability range. To ensure that there was no ‘grade inflation’ (i.e. that standards remain steady over many years) pass rates were adjusted from year-to-year to ensure that no more than about 70% of those who sat the exam actually passed. In 1965 a new exam was set up for the more able Modern school pupils to be called the Certificate of Secondary Education, catering for pupils below the top 25% of the ability range, yet above the bottom 40%. A Certificate was awarded for each separate subject but, and here was the novelty, the subject could be taught to a syllabus set nationally (like GCE), or a separate syllabus could be set up by a group of teachers to reflect local characteristics.

By the mid 1960s the problem created by a segregated system of secondary schools, and an examination system that could not be applied equitably across the entire ability range was such that, in the institutional jargon of an unwieldy Department, what was called Circular 10/65, was sent to every local authority. It was as monumental in its significance as the Education Act of 1870. In its deference to local sensitivities it was as gentle as had been Forster in his unwillingness to upset the ‘benevolent interests’ of the status quo. What it said was imminently significant “The government are aware that the complete elimination of selection and separatism in secondary education will take time to achieve. They do not seek to impose destructive or precipitate change on existing schools; they recognise that the evolution of separate schools into a comprehensive system must be a constructive process requiring careful planning by LEAs in consultation with all those concerned”.10
The idea that talents are learnt for the service of others and not given, and that knowledge should bring humility and a sense of involvement in mankind, are just as necessary correctives to the arrogance of a meritocrat in a highly technological world, as they were when the grammar school was founded long ago; without them a school’s record of academic success would be indeed alarming. 

People hold strong views on the question of selection. Should the brightest be educated separately from the rest of the country, and if ‘yes’ by what means should they be identified? It was the publication of “The Rise of the Meritocracy” by Michael Young in 1958 that sharpened the argument. The book is a political satire of the finest kind, purporting to be an historical analysis of educational policy written with imagined hindsight from the year 2033; it’s a clever piece of suggestive fiction. As a boy in the 1930s Michael Young had actually spent a year at one of the country’s most academic Grammar school, Manchester (MGS), and disliked it intensely. Too much forced feeding of intelligent youngsters was a thoroughly bad idea, he argued, for it would produces a super-elite of booklearnt youngsters. Young called such men the “Meritocracy”, using the formula I.Q. + Effort = Merit. People may well object to the aristocracy, wrote Young, with all the unfair advantage that pertain to breeding, but does Britain really want to be administered entirely rationally? Young knew his audience well; the English have always heartily disliked “clever clogs” who they imagine are “too big for their own boots”.

By inference Young cast doubt on the academic grammar school, and in the uncertainties of the 1960s he was highly influential. In six years Margaret Thatcher, as Minister of Education, actually closed more grammar schools in favour of establishing comprehensive schools, than did her labour counter-part. How, anyone not familiar with the politics of that time might readily ask, could that have possibly happened? In the confusing nomenclature of English education, where “public” school means a private school, and where a grammar school is a superior secondary school, (not a junior school as in America), there was until the late 1970s a further confusion — a Direct Grant (D.G.) Grammar School. These were mainly ancient day schools that had resisted the temptation to become elite Public boarding Schools.

Entry was strictly by academic ability, and they had foundation funds that enabled many youngsters to be educated free of charge, independent of the LEA. Amongst the 170 such schools were the old grammar schools of Manchester, Leeds, Bristol, Newcastle, Lancaster and Birmingham.

With parliament’s half-hearted ex-
pansion of secondary education in the 1920s politicians favoured offering these older schools a direct grant in exchange for educating 25% or more of their pupils free of charge, rather than face the capital costs of building separate schools. D.G. schools were socially comprehensive, and academically outstanding. Here comes the final confusion. The term Public School has no legal status, and membership of the HMC, like any other ‘club’, was personal to the headmaster, not to the institution. Over time many of the headteachers of the D.G. grammar schools were invited to join HMC; by inference their schools then became public schools even though the social status of their pupils were very different. MGS granted as many Oxbridge scholarships in the 1960s as Winchester College.

By the time “The Rise of the Meritocracy” was published two remarkable High Masters had redefined the MGS curriculum in ways which made it the new yardstick for selective secondary education. Able to select some 210 eleven-year-old boys each year from right across Greater Manchester, their average IQ was in excess of 135. These were boys who were going to do well, whatever. When all other schools were demonstrating how bright were their pupils by taking ever larger numbers of ‘O’ levels, the MGS of post Michael Young days, thought that such an exam was a distraction (and only allowed its pupils to take six subjects). What MGS was interested in was Sixth Form education. Taking ‘O’ levels a year earlier than in most other schools, almost every pupil went on to spend three years in the sixth form, where the range of subjects was enormous. Here were the unique bits; no more than two-thirds of a boy’s time could be allocated to examination subjects. Every pupil had to spend a third of his time on general studies; scientists had to study the humanities, historians and those taking arts subjects had to study the sciences, secondly, every boy was expected to undertake some form of social service work, and to participate in an extraordinary array of out-of-school activities. MGS was a place of self-generating, spontaneous activity.

Direct Grant schools provided a unique bridge between the private and the public sectors of education. They fed on talent, and they developed it. They provided an excellent education, and they were not expensive. Egalitarian they certainly were, and unashamedly academic, but they were extremely socially aware as the above thesis from the school prospectus of 1965 shows. By their very achievements the D.G. schools made many enemies. Bridges they might have been for many a working-class boy, but to those politically opposed to any form of selection, they were an easier, and more obvious, target than the full-blown boarding public schools some-where in the distant countryside. To an idealistic socialist these schools, in their own backyards, demonstrated an approach to education which they abhorred, and to which some of the very pupils they wanted to lift the standards in their own as-yet-untested comprehensive schools preferred to go. To the Labour politicians from the late 1960s the enemy of comprehensive education was the Direct Grant school, not the Public School?.
Comprehensive schools were conceived as a beautiful dream by ardent educationalists; they were frequently delivered in confusion, and developed for the most part in a mêlée of indifference, during which many of those who should have been fully engaged looked instead only for sectional advantage.

The relationship of school to community is inevitably convoluted; communities set standards and aspirations for the schools, while the schools themselves by developing youngsters who can think for themselves, may well subsequently reverse what the community had earlier expected the schools to achieve. The changes of 1870, of 1902 and again of 1944 were largely imposed by the political expectations of the day; they became the things ‘done to’ the schools. The 1950s and ‘60s started to change all that. No longer were parents prepared to accept being told what was best for their children, while ever better qualified teachers were more willing to defy what they saw as the over-simplistic assumptions of policy makers.

So, as the tripartite system began to unravel, political tensions erupted. To those aspiring to traditional values, the grammar school offered the best chance of social progression, while to those who aspired to a more equitable society, the comprehensive schools seemed the surest way of keeping the door to progress open for as long as possible. Some of the most ardent supporters of grammar schools were those very Labour M.P.s whose early lives had gained so much from being treated as the rising elite. Conversely, some of the most strident supporters of egalitarian comprehensive education in their youth became, years later, just as ardent in their support of their ‘rights’ to send their own children to grammar schools, or public schools.

The choice represented a bitter pill for many to swallow. If a person believed in grammar schools, then they had to accept that an inevitable consequence was that three-quarters of the population would be assigned to Modern schools. Selection split families apart. There was no comfortable half-way house. If a comprehensive school existed in the same locality as a grammar school, given English pretensions being as they were, the comprehensive would inevitably lose out on those brighter children who would probably accept a place in the grammar school, in which case the comprehensive became in practice little more than a Modern school. For comprehensive schools to work it seemed that grammar schools had to be abolished.

The best opportunity England had to recover Milton’s dream for open-entry secondary academies was in 1944, but Butler missed that opportunity. Consequently for the next twenty-one years England invested vast sums of money in building schools designed to support a segregated system of education. A quarter of these schools had been built to grammar school specification, while three-quarters had been built to the lower stan-
ards thought appropriate for Modern schools, with smaller class rooms, narrower corridors and fewer playing fields. Because the 11+ was skewed towards middle-class culture, most of the grammar schools were built in the better residential areas, while the Modern schools were all too often on ‘the wrong side of the tracks’. You could literally see the difference both in the buildings and in the attitudes of pupils and staff — one was a symbol of pride, the other of functionality and economy.

A few authorities back in the mid 1940s, especially those in large rural areas like Anglesey in North Wales, found a loophole in the regulations and created on a single site secondary schools that contained all three strands, grammar, technical and modern, under one roof. There weren’t many of these — a mere 134 out of a total of more than 5,300, and they weren’t very large, frequently with fewer than 800 pupils and rarely more than 1,200. With encouragement from Circular 10/65 a new generation of administrators took these ideas, and combined them with the assumption that maximum choice of subjects was key to a pupil’s ultimate success. They urged that schools should be designed for 1,500 or more pupils. At this point the general public started to get worried — wouldn’t our children be lost in such schools? — and the political consensus between the Conservatives and Labour began to unravel.

Nonetheless, by the late ‘60s most authorities were well advanced with plans for comprehensive reorganisation, even though many of these plans were unpopular, and involved amalgamating three or four schools on different sites. Many grammar schools were closed, nearly always after fierce local resistance. The Conservatives under Edward Heath won the 1970 election and appointed the young Margaret Thatcher as Minister of Education. She did not, however, reverse the policy of comprehensive education, even though she did slow it down. Labour won the 1974 election, and by that stage the difference between the two main parties had become bitter; Labour would allow nothing more to get in the way of achieving a fully comprehensive system. The direct grant schools were to be the target. In early 1975 government announced that the Direct Grant would cease as from September 1976. Seventy of these schools agreed to accept the control of the local authority, while 100 more opted to become fee-paying independent schools. As an American author wrote “It is both bizarre and tragic to me to see you now attacking and threatening to destroy your best schools in the name of comprehensivisation. These unique institutions… must be amongst the best the world offers… for the English people now, with forethought and deliberation, to set about destroying the flower of their education system seems to me, if I may put it candidly, sheer masochism. It is the triumph of pure blind political dogma over educational common sense.”

Fair Deals for All
“As you leave school I have one piece of advice to give you. Develop at least two hobbies that have absolutely nothing to do with your career. Work hard at your career, but stick even more closely to your hobbies — foster them, love them, and allow yourself to be intrigued by them. Your greatest strength in life will lie in what you love to do, when you’re not having to earn your living.”

The past, it’s often said, is like another country; they do things differently there. But the past may not be that distant. In April 1971 the Times reported “A lack of enthusiasm for wealth as such in Britain”, and expressed the hope, “that there are probably still more people... who will give total effort for reasons of idealism, rather than for reasons of gain”. Many readers of this Thesis will remember such attitudes, while others would have been taught by people who epitomised such thinking; people of broad, general interests who saw paid work as a means to an end, not an end in itself. It was a slower moving time; people were more tolerant of each other; society was more stable, and only one child in ten was born outside marriage.

Almost all children below the age of eleven enjoyed school in the early ’70s, but by the age of sixteen a third actively disliked it, while a third simply tolerated it. The question that had been unanswered since 1944 — namely what is the purpose of secondary education for everyone — was still clamouring for an answer. Simply to have removed the stigma of failing the 11+ Exam was no solution if that condemned roughly half the country’s children to a watered-down academic curriculum that would simply bore them silly for their five adolescent years.

Worried even in the late 1960s at falling levels of literacy, government commissioned a major report, “A Language for Life”, into the teaching of English. It is almost six hundred pages could be summarised in a single sentence; if children are to master the English language then every teacher, regardless of their specialisms, had also to be a teacher of language skills. To primary teachers, that was self-evident, but secondary teachers were infuriated. “Does that mean that in addition to teaching chemistry, which is difficult enough, I’ll also have to make up for what the English teachers can’t do for themselves?” asked an irate but far from untypical, science teacher. That secondary education had to be about equipping every child with a range of skills for life, not simply a preparation of the few for higher education, did not rest comfortably in secondary school thinking.

The adolescent of the late 1970s was far less amenable to accepting someone else’s explanation of the inexpen-
cable that had been their parent’s a
generation earlier. “The school is not
like it was”, recalled an experienced
teacher in Salford approaching retire-
ment, “School and community used to
understand each other. Teachers didn’t
have to do anything special. We just
drew on what was there in the home
background. It’s not like that any
more. How can you make school feel
like a community when there is no
community out there?”

It ought to be evident. Schools
can’t exist oblivious of where their pu-
pils spend the majority of their wak-
ing hours, namely beyond the school
gates. “The Challenge for the Com-
prehensive School”, published in 1983
was one of the most perceptive com-
mentaries of the time. The school has
to work out how the culture that the
child brings into the school, and the
values of the community fostered by
their parents, can inform the curricu-
lum in ways which will equip young-
sters not simply to fit into the adult
world, but to change it where neces-
sary to create a better place.

Education has to ha-
ave a moral purpose that is
more than simply upholding the sta-
tus quo. To traditionalists and conser-
vatives alike this was a dangerous and
revolutionary idea, and cast the com-
prehensive school as an assault on the
Establishment.

Hard as it is now to fully appreci-
ate, there was no National Curricu-
lum twenty-five years ago, no league
tables, no SATs, and no regular school
inspections. Ofsted was then just a
meaningless muddle of letters. To a
headteacher their chief education of-
ficer (CEO) was far more significant
than the Minister of Education, and
a local councillor more to be courted
than their MP. Ministers were, in ef-
fect, kept at arm’s length by the col-
lective of CEOs known rather grandly,
but appropriately, as the Society of
Education Officers. These officers
tended to regard the Minister as be-
ing answerable to them for negotiating
in Cabinet for an ever larger share of
the Rate Support Grant (RSG); money
from central government that subsi-
dised the local rates and part of which
was allocated to education. No Min-
ister would ever think of visiting a
school without first asking the permi-
sion of the local CEO, and none would
ever attempt to tell teachers what to
teach. The curriculum remained a lo-
cal responsibility.

It was the miner’s strike, the three-
day week, and the government’s need
to seek financial assistance from the
International Monetary Fund that pro-
vided the economic jolt that brought
a decade of complacency to its knees.
In August 1979 the Conservatives won
the general election under their new,
untried leader, Margaret Thatcher.
Commentators have subsequently
seen this Election as an historic turn-
ing point, and Thatcherism as a whole
new defining creed. It didn’t immedi-
ately seem like that at the time, espe-
cially in the schools. To the perceptive,
however, the Conservatives by rushing
through the Assisted Places Scheme
that offered thirty thousand state-
funded scholarships to individual pri-
ivate schools, effectively ‘bailed out’
those former direct grant grammar
schools which had been forced to go
independent three years earlier. This
signified, more than anything, that the
Conservatives simply didn’t trust state
education to look after itself.