

# The Refutation of British Post-War Consensus Theory: The Socialist Education Ideal



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## Abstract

This article explored the post-war British official commitment to the foundation of a universal system of education in response to the socialist ideal of "secondary education for all" as publicised by R. H. Tawney. The objective was to take exception to the well-established literature of British politics of 'consensus' by means of gathering the necessary data to unveil the usually disregarded politics of 'conflict' between the two major British political parties during the years of political consensus. The approach was structural functionalist and the focus was on the interplay of the dominant and assertive groups of power (Conservatives vs. Labour) with their respective educational agendas that instigated educational reforms. The analysis showed that the socialist-inspired educational reforms were introduced in a spirit of political 'conflict', not 'consensus', and that the educational changes brought about were in favour of the dominant, not assertive, group.

## Keywords

Conflict;  
consensus;  
dominant;  
assertive;  
tripartite division.

## الكلمات المفتاحية

صراع ؛  
توافق ؛  
هيمنة ؛  
توكيد ؛  
تقسيم ثلاثي.

## دحض نظرية الإجماع البريطاني بعد الحرب: نموذج التعليم الاشتراكي

### ملخص

تهدف هذه المقالة إلى إعادة النظر في مفهوم شائع في أدبيات السياسة البريطانية المعاصرة وتاريخها وهو "التوافق" السياسي، وذلك بالبحث والتقصي في مجال تاريخ التربية البريطاني لجمع ما توافر من معطيات متعلقة أساسا بالالتزام الرسمي للحكومات البريطانية المتعاقبة في فترة ما بعد الحرب العالمية الثانية بالتأسيس لنظام تعليمي عام تباعا للطرح الاشتراكي الذي ناضل من أجله ر ه طاوني، والقصد من عملية التحري كشف النقاب عن سياسة "الصراع" (وليس "التوافق" كما هو متداول) بين الحزبين السياسيين البريطانيين الرئيسيين (المحافظين والعمال) خلال سنوات التوافق السياسي. وتعتمد هذه المقالة المنهج البنوي الوظيفي حيث يتم التركيز فيه على علاقة الهيمنة والتوكيد بين حزب العمال والمحافظين وتداولهما على مراكز السلطة بأجنداتهم التعليمية الخاصة بكل منهما والتي كانت وراء الإصلاحات التي أدخلت على المنظومة التربوية البريطانية. وتشير النتائج المتوصل إليها إلى أن روح الصراع كانت وراء كل المحاولات الرامية إلى تغيير المنظومة التربوية حسب الأجندة الاشتراكية المنفق عليها، وأن نتائج التغيير كانت في مصلحة المجموعة المهيمنة أكثر من نظيرتها.

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## Introduction

The area of academic interest of this article is history of British education. It purports to explore the bearings of party politics on the educational system in England and Wales, specifically. The existence of two different systems of education in Britain, public and private, calls for reflection. It primarily suggests the confluence of populist and elitist designs of education provision, with the respective political/ideological agendas for fundamental change to bridge social disparities equal only to that for the preservation of the social *status quo* that goes with it. This actually mounts to an attitudinal confrontation between advocates of education “radical change” and “*status quo*” with a declared purpose of imposing their respective ideologies on the educational system. This state of affairs captures further academic curiosity with the knowledge that it is set against a well-established political literature of ‘consensus’ (not ‘party’) politics, which corresponds to post-war British political history up to the coming of Mrs. Margaret Thatcher and her Conservative government to power in 1979.

The objective of this article is to contest the party-political consensus theory by substantiating the overlooked conflict (not consent) between the Labour Party and The Conservative Party and their identifiable social and political assumptions (populist vs. elitist) about the English system of education.

The topic is approached in a structural functionalist perspective, with a particular reference to Scotford-Archer and Vaughan’s conflict ‘Model’ in “Domination and Assertion in Education Systems.” The two scholars have investigated educational change in Britain between 1780 and 1850 and have come to conclude that educational reforms that provided secondary education for the middle classes and elementary education for the lower classes resulted from the conflict between two influential groups: one “dominant” (the upper classes and the Church) and the other “assertive” (middle and lower classes). It is the interplay of these two dominant and assertive groups which brought educational changes around (Reid 153-59). They have pointed out that the success of the dominant group emanates from its ability to overcome challenge by turning educational conflicts to a good account; or simply in not being challenged. Conversely, the assertive group is often refused education-related decision making which renders their mission to alter the order imposed by the dominant group extremely demanding (“Domination and Assertion” 62). Scotford-Archer and Vaughan have interestingly suggested that such pressure groups could not be exclusively social classes or religious bodies. This offers the possibility to replace their respective dominant and assertive groups with the Conservative Party (and the establishment) and the Labour Party (and the trade unionists) and apply their model to 1945 / 1979 England, the commonly known years of political consensus.

The article is divided into three sections. The first looks back on the declared expectations and intents of the *Education (Butler) Act* of 1944. The second examines some of the provisions attributed to the *Act*, and brings to the fore the disregarded divergences of education plans that actually generated instances of confrontation between the two major political parties over the issue of reforms in the educational system. In the third, the model of domination and assertion as suggested in this article is reappraised.

## The Butler Act of Education

By 1944, and at long last, an Act was worked out and introduced to Parliament by Richard Austen Butler, the then Conservative President of the Board of Education in the war-time coalition government. It mainly was the result of some century-long relentless socialist campaigns to get the government involved in providing education to the lower social orders. The *Report of the Ministry of Education* for the year 1950 gives an overview of the intents of these efforts: “to build a single, but not uniform, system out of many diverse elements; to widen educational opportunity and at the same time to raise standards; to knit the educational system more closely into the life of an increasingly democratic and industrialized community; these are among the main ideas which, despite two major wars, have moved legislators and administrators alike” (qtd. in Chitty 131). Of all the Acts involved in this process, mention could be made of the *1906 Education Act* (the *Provision of Meals Act*), *McKenna’s Act* (1907), the *Education Act of H.A.L. Fisher* (1918), the *Hadow Report* (1926), also known as the Education of the Adolescent, the *Spens Report* (1938), all of which constitute the fertilization and germination of an end-on, national, free and compulsory system of primary and secondary education for all.

The *Butler Act of Education* reformed (by means of democratization) the state primary and secondary education in England and Wales. The state fully committed itself, as never before, to establishing a national educational system, compulsory and free, for all children, that comprised a primary, a secondary, and a further education stage, very much in response to the expectations expressed above—or this is what is being suggested! In the words of education historian W. O. Lester Smith: “Before 1944 our policy was secondary education for the fortunate few; since 1944 it has been secondary education for all—as radical and revolutionary a change as our educational system is ever likely to experience” (104). Basically, the *Act* intended “to contribute towards the spiritual, moral, and physical development of the community by securing that efficient education throughout those stages shall be available to meet the needs of the population of their area” (II. 7. 4). The *Act* called for the creation of a Ministry of Education, and the Minister of Education was given the task of a chief planner but promoted a policy of decentralization by means of which the Ministry planned for policy guidelines, and the local education authorities were left free to adopt the type of schooling “to afford all pupils opportunities for education [...] in view of their different ages, abilities and aptitudes, and of the different periods for which they may be expected to remain at school, including practical instruction and training

appropriate to their respective needs” (II. 7. 5). It also carried through the ‘dual system’ already launched by the *Education Act* of 1870 to do away with the thorny issue of religious controversies. Last but not least, it laid the foundation of the ‘tripartite’ division of secondary schools (grammar, secondary modern, secondary technical) to answer the local requirements as regards the provision for secondary education.

When reviewing the *Act*, very little could be said about its worth as a genuine piece of legislation greatly expected to answer the emotionally over-charged quest for educational radical change voiced in the words of Labour party theorist Richard H. Tawney’s “secondary education for all.” The *Act* was much more of a technical compromise between old traditions and new aspirations than anything else. The tripartite division, from the outset, was dubious. The grammar type, previously recognized as secondary schools, was already a well-established academic institution; the secondary modern was the promoted elementary schools; and the secondary technical was formerly identified as Junior Technical, Junior Art and Junior Commercial schools. And these were the proposals of the *Hadow Report* (1926)—they could not be any easier to find! Yet, the different Sections of the *Act* did not give a clear statement to define the types of secondary schools that local education authorities ought to introduce, nor did it make mention of any such division as the tripartite. Then, there are the blatant selective tests that were adjunct to the tripartite division for entry to secondary education administered to eleven-year olds, formally known as the ‘eleven-plus exam,’ and which rose many controversies as to their true social purposes. Interestingly enough, the *Butler Act of Education* left the whole independent or fee-paying system of primary and secondary schools untouched, which could tell of the “little doubt that Winston Churchill shared many of the upper-class prejudices about mass schooling, and that he was not at all keen to give more responsibility to the State in this field” (Lemosse 66). In sum, the *Act* embodied two conflicting philosophies, one populist and the other elitist. as Olive Banks, an educational sociologist, argues, the *Act*: “[was] a compromise in which the elite ideology, populist pressures towards equality, and the needs of the economy, together produced an expansion of secondary education to include all children, but within the framework of an elite system” (18).

The *Act* brought about change, yet not as radical as its advocates wished, and kept almost untouched the inherited tradition. In the words of Nicholas Hans, an educational comparatist: “England has proved to the world her exceptional ability to incorporate new and radical ideas in the old inherited system without uprooting it” (254).

### **The Bone of Contention**

The tripartite system offered no parity of esteem, and no freedom of choice for that matter. The grammar school type had more historical, social and academic prestige than the other two types combined. They were “the jewels in the crown of secondary education” (Lemosse 98-99) and had always been considered middle-class preserves (Dent 51). They were selective academic secondary schools inside the state-run system of education and gave mostly middle-class pupils free access to universities and white-collar professions, in much the same way as the old Public Schools in the fee-paying system. The secondary modern type could not compare: no solid historical heritage, social prestige, nor academic excellence. It was non-selective and could be imagined as ‘plan B’ for failures of the eleven-plus exam. Yet, the popular education ideal that these schools would prepare pupils for life and not for exams gave the secondary moderns some credit by the late forties and the fifties. The truth was that many middle-class parents “wish[ed] to spare their child and themselves the pain and shame of the secondary modern school and so send their child to a private school” (R. King 68). If middle-class parents could avoid the ‘shame’ of secondary modern schools, working-class parents could not, which made of it the poor ‘Cinderella’ of the secondary education system. And the rampaging criticism of these schools suggests that they became working-class educational ‘ghettos.’ The secondary technical school was a poor third in the secondary education provision, and was intended to cater education for a few able pupils. This type of school offered ‘practical’ curricula: engineering for boys and commercial subjects for girls. The educational policy of the time was that the secondary technical should enrol from the same intellectual pool as the grammar school. In practice, these schools were scarce due to the expensive supplies of modern equipments. Children and parents still considered them as the third resort after failing the eleven-plus exam, and after discovering the unsuitability of the secondary modern school. Therefore, the so-called tripartite system (grammar, modern and technical schools) is best viewed as ‘bipartite’ (grammar and modern), with only two secondary school types on offer—of which the grammar type was the ‘prime cut’ and not at everybody’s reach. Of this disparity of esteem, Butler said after the passing of the *Act*: “We have clearly not yet ensured that our technical and modern schools provide a genuine, distinctive, and full education” (qtd. in Lester Smith 107).

Labour militants, as an assertive group, voiced their outrageous dissatisfaction. During the making of the Bill, Alice Bacon, responsible at the time for education in the Labour National Executive Committee, remarked the considerable internal disagreement over a tripartite division of secondary education. James Chuter Ede, Labour Parliamentary Secretary in the Board of Education and one of Butler’s collaborators during the drafting of the *Education Act* of 1944, was among those who refused to include this ‘division’ into the Bill. In April 1944 he exclaimed: “I do not know where people get the idea about *three* types of school, because I have gone through the Bill with a small tooth comb and I can find only one school for senior pupils and that is a secondary school. What you like to make of it will depend on the way you serve the precise needs of the individual area in the country” (qtd. in Chitty 20). During its annual conference in 1946, Labour members revolted against the disparity of esteem in the tripartite division and the grammar schools’ low intake of working class pupils. Ellen Wilkinson, the then Labour Minister of Education, tried to dissuade them by arguing rather awkwardly (as often ill-informed politicians do) that: “If the teachers get the same pay, if the holidays are the same, and if as far as possible the buildings are good in each case, then you get in practice parity” (qtd. in Fenwick 55). The commitment for people’s welfare was such that the Minister was

ordered “to reshape educational policy in accordance with socialist principles” (qtd. in Fenwick 172). During the nineteen fifties, the Labour Party grew the conviction that the question of disparity of esteem could not be more serious. Given the status of grammar schools, the provision of such schools to answer all local needs, including those of the working-class children, was a ‘myth.’ The only solution, then, was to abolish the widely-contested (and later disproven) selective eleven-plus exam (Lawson and Silver 425). Critics have come to notice that the exam proved to measure “scholastic attainment” and not “scholastic ability” (Lemosse 113). According to T. H. Marshall, a sociologist, this exam was in essence a shift from inherited modes of “selection by elimination” to “selection by differentiation” (42), all of which was in favour of the dominant group of course—the Conservatives and with them the establishment.

By extension, there was no equality of educational opportunity. No section of the *Butler Act of Education* explicitly guaranteed that pupils from different social classes would have equal educational opportunities. Any assumption that the *Act*, by compelling the local education authorities to provide secondary education according to pupils’ different ages, abilities and aptitudes, meant to promote equality of educational opportunity remains hard to defend. So long as the tripartite division of secondary education and the eleven-plus examination remained, legions of socially and intellectually handicapped pupils from lower social backgrounds failed to make the best of what the new system had to offer. The post-war Labour government had its hands full implementing the *Butler Act of Education*, i.e. raising the school-age compulsion, and repairing and constructing more schools, which hardly left them any room to terminate social and educational injustices. And this, it must be recalled, posed no serious challenge to the Conservatives.

True concern over equality of educational opportunity appeared clearly in the *Labour Party Election Manifesto of 1951*: “Labour will press forward towards greater social equality and the establishment of equal opportunities for all. We shall extend our policy of giving all young people equal opportunities in education. We shall encourage a spirit of hope and adventure in the young” (qtd. in Dale 78). Labour found a wealth of substance in the sociological studies of the nineteen fifties like those of Jean Floud and A. H. Hasley, to mention but these, to bring out into the open the negative effects of poor living conditions on the school performance of working class pupils and to champion the comprehensive schools. In view of the Conservative Government’s general neglect of encouraging, let alone ordering, local education authorities to establish plans for ‘comprehensivisation,’ the Labour Party had gone one step further by taking stock of the prevailing schooling system while pointing to the Conservatives in power as a stick-in-the-mud Party as the following excerpt from the Labour Party General Election Manifesto of 1955, *Forward with Labour*, suggests: “One of the greatest barriers to equality of opportunity in our schools is the segregation of our children into grammar and other types of school at the age of the eleven-plus examination. The Tories say this means abolishing the grammar schools. On the contrary, it means that grammar-school education will be open to all who can benefit by it.” And explained their choice of the comprehensive school model: “In our system of comprehensive education we do not intend to impose one uniform pattern of school. Local authorities will have the right to decide how best to apply the comprehensive principle” (qtd. in Dale 93). The growing anxiety of most Labour activists about the elitist principle of ‘tripartism,’ the eleven-plus exam, and inequality of educational opportunity reinforces the thought that an efficient reform of secondary education depended to a far extent on the swing of the party political pendulum. While the Conservatives championed the cause of the grammar school during their term of office (1951-1964) to safeguard selection of the few, the Labour Party promoted ‘comprehensivisation’ of secondary education to check social injustices.

The indifference of the Conservative government compelled the Labour Party to exert enormous pressure during the fifties to convince local education authorities to devise methods to soften the eleven-plus exam to render “the selection procedures more innocuous and less obvious” (Dent 108). The number of local education authorities eager to espouse the comprehensive system fell short of Labour’s high expectations, and the Conservatives were not innocent. This is how it works. Educational policy at the local level is responsive to the results of local elections themselves subject to party political influences. Whenever political control of a council changed, the Chief Officer was customarily instructed to prepare new policy plans. Some conflicting attitudes were noticed between the Labour and the Conservative Party over the establishment of comprehensive schools in many local education authorities. For example, in 1954, the London Labour-controlled county council wished to apply the already well developed model of the girls’ Kidbrooke Comprehensive school on the Elthan Hill school. Backed by the Prime Minister, Sir Winston Churchill, the then Conservative Minister of Education, Florence Horsbrugh, refused the plan. The Educational comparatist, Edmund J. King, has made reference to some examples in London and Manchester where Florence Horsbrugh refused to approve comprehensive school plans “put forward by a local education authority with full legal competence and an electoral mandate to develop comprehensive schools” (185-86).

The Labour Party took on itself the task to campaign for a national system of comprehensive schools after it grew convinced that the failure of most working-class pupils in the eleven-plus exam reflected social inequalities. Abolition of the eleven-plus became the watchword of Labour education policy. In the Labour Party General Election Manifesto of 1955, *Forward with Labour*, the Party had shown its eagerness “to remove from the primary schools the strain of the eleven-plus examination.” The Labour Manifesto went further in its argument: “This [the eleven plus exam] cramps the free and happy life which should stimulate the children’s early years. It penalises the children who develop late and gives inferior place in our education to the practical skills increasingly essential to our industrial efficiency.” They also made it clear that once back to power they will ask Local Education Authorities “to submit schemes abolishing the examination; to realize the fulfilment of the education Act, 1944, we shall encourage comprehensive secondary schooling” (qtd. in Dale 85). The intention was clear and no better electoral promise could be

formulated. Yet, history proved that more steps were needed especially when facing up to a solid conservative state apparatus traditionally suspicious of socialist plans.

When the Labour Party came back to office in 1964, it was clear that the national educational policy was to be amended to bring to an end, in the words of Harold Wilson, “educational apartheid” (qtd. in Taylor 23). Two problems urged solutions. First, the eleven-plus exam proved unreliable and hampered pupils’ choice of a suitable secondary school. Second, there was the problem of ‘inequality’ of educational opportunity. The comprehensive school was the solution: it embodied the three types of secondary schools; admission to it was unconditioned; its curricula ranged from academic to practical subjects; and its intake were from relatively all walks of life. Its originality derives from its classless ideology. Labour Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, appointed the socialist thinker and reformist, Anthony Crosland, Secretary of State for Education and Science. After long consultative efforts, Crosland issued the long-awaited comprehensive reform in the *Circular 10/65* on July 12th, 1965, which officially marked the beginning of comprehensive reorganisation: “It is the government’s declared objective” reads the Circular “to end selection at eleven plus and to eliminate separatism in secondary education[....] The Secretary of state accordingly requests local education authorities, if they have not already done so, to prepare and submit to him plans for reorganising secondary education in their areas on comprehensive lines” (qtd. in Pollard 46). It must be surprising that after all the fervent manifestos and claims for secondary education in which all social barriers should collapse, the secretary of state had merely ‘requested’ and not ‘required’ local education authorities to submit plans of comprehensive schools. Because of this discretionary circular, in addition to the general reluctance of most of local authorities towards implementing populist educational schemes, the number of local education authorities that complied was trivial.

The domination-and-assertion relationship between the Conservative and the Labour Party grew dramatic by the seventies. The opposition of the Conservatives to Labour’s educational policy became official in 1970, after their comeback to power. Mrs. Margaret Thatcher, the then Conservative Minister of Education and Science, issued *Circular 10/70* to repeal the Labour *Circular 10/65* and to declare that all local educational authorities were free to apply the secondary education system that suited them best (qtd. in Pollard 52). The political contentions over the issue of secondary education were so frequent that the Labour Party, in its quest for a national system of comprehensives, needed to come down with a ‘sledgehammer’ as their patience was wearing thin. According to Edmund J. King, the conflicts reached a critical stage in 1975 when a newly elected Conservative local educational authority, near Manchester, decided to dissolve away an already well-developed comprehensive plan. Despite the fact that the Labour Minister of Education and Science had ordered the local authority in question to permit the free development of that plan, the order was defeated by a court decision (185-86).

The Labour Government under the premiership of James Callaghan (1976-1979) was in fact brought face to face with the reality that the *Education Act* of 1944 was made flexible to favour the English unyielding temper. A firm decision to curtail all evasive, reluctant and cunning measures that impeded people’s welfare was required, hence the *Education Act* of 1976. It was introduced to close what Labour considered loopholes in the *Education Act* of 1944 by officially declaring the comprehensive system a national policy of education: “Local Educational Authorities shall, in the exercise and performance of their powers and duties relating to secondary education, have regard to the general principle that such education [comprehensive] is to be provided only in schools where the arrangements for the admission of pupils are not based (wholly or partly) on selection by reference to ability or aptitude” (*Act, 1976* 1). With regard to the authority of the secretary of state, the first subsection of the second section of the Act states that : “If at any time it appears to the Secretary of State that progress [...] in giving effect to the principle stated in section 1 [comprehensive] above is required in [...] any local education authority, he may require the authority to prepare and submit to him [...] proposals for the purpose of giving effect to that principle in the area of the authority [...] specified by him” (2). The remaining sections further specify the new powers conferred on the Secretary of State. The selective grammar schools were left by the *Act* to decide what status to have. Some submitted comprehensive outlines and thus decided to remain within the state system. The remainder became independent grammar schools relying on financial support other than grants of the government, and so it did to all the independent secondary schools. The old Public Schools, in particular, had undergone one of their hardest times under James Callaghan’s Government.

The Labour’s strife for a socialist home policy, especially in education, was far from being an outer face of abstract political influences. As Edmund J. King, says, it was difficult for the lower social classes “not to feel hostility and a ‘two-nation’ attitude towards the privileged, especially as ‘parity of esteem’ and ‘equality of access’ are still so far from being achieved in the nation’s schools” (273). The advocates of an egalitarian system of education had two solutions at hand: either launch a large-scale social policy to reduce social cleavages; or provide a non-selective system of education (like the comprehensive system). Actually, the Labour Party discovered it needed both. In view of the staunch socialist policies of the Labour Governments during the nineteen seventies, many argued that the Labour Party could not do better than what they did in those years.

The Conservative victory in the general election of 1979 announced a significant change in British Politics. Many Conservatives condemned the Labour Party for their ‘excessive’ commitment to the welfare state policy which resulted in the ‘shameful’ loan from the International Monetary Fund in 1976 during times of stringent financial conditions, caused by the international oil crisis. Conservatives opted for old ‘Toryism,’ known in the economic jargon as ‘Monetarism.’ Education obviously was amid matters that needed immediate attendance. The *Education Act* of 1976 had to be reformed. Under the newly elected Conservative Prime Minister, Mrs. Thatcher, the Conservative majority in Parliament passed the *Education Act* of 1980, which made it clear that local education authorities were free to adopt

their favourite school type(s), and ensured parents the necessary help for choice. Moreover, the most important amendment was the rescheduling of state grants to independent schools (Maclure 388).

### The ‘Model’ in action

The land slide victory of the Labour Party after the general elections of 1945 ushered in a new era of British political history. Never before had Labour and their supporters been elevated from assertion to domination so comfortably. The historic resistance of the British establishment to the over-publicised socialist plans had suddenly given way to post-war politics of consensus which converged the various existing political perspectives towards wiping out both the rubbles of WWII and the memories of previous social injustices. The welfare state became a national concern, and all efforts were made to make it a success story. Education was part and parcel of it.

The *Education Act of 1944* was a remarkable step towards the democratisation of secondary education in Britain; but was not bold enough. This could not have been checked during immediate post-war government as Labour in office had to concentrate all available means in rebuilding schools destroyed during the war and building new ones to answer the exigencies of large intake of pupils after raising the school leaving age to fifteen. Such is a situation where the Conservatives, who now fell to assertion, and their elitist educational agenda were safe simply because they were not challenged.

The following general election brought back the Conservatives to power (1951-64), and by the same token, to domination. All that the Conservatives had to do on the issue of introducing the comprehensive school type to answer the growing educational malcontents of the leftists during the fifties was just to stay put.

The alternation between Labour and Conservative governments from 1964 to 1979 shifts the conflict relationship between a dominant and an assertive group over the exertion of special educational policies to an advanced level of aggressiveness. The dominant group (the Conservatives) was undisturbed until 1964, when the assertive group (the Labour) attempted dominance. Indeed, the Labour Party became dominant, while the Conservative became assertive, until 1970 with some limited impact on the education related issues—according to some zealous socialists of course. After this date, the Conservative Party became dominant and attempted to restore and re-implement its educational principles while the Labour Party was falling back to its assertive position. The reverse took place in 1974, and a forceful Labour measure followed in 1976. And again the order of things was reversed by the coming of the Conservatives to power in 1979 with yet another package of education policy much to the dislike of their adversaries. It was within this ‘conflict’ relationship between groups of policy-makers that educational changes were attempted, the impact of which could hardly reach grass roots levels.

### Conclusion:

The *Butler Act of Education* was introduced in 1944 and bore the name of its Conservative author during the war-time coalition government. The *Act* democratized the state primary and secondary education in England and Wales. The review of it reveals that it fell short of fulfilling the socialist ideal of “Secondary Education for All.” The changes that the *Act* brought in spared the inherited tradition. The tripartite system offered neither parity of esteem, freedom of choice nor equality of educational opportunity. Labour militants, as an assertive group, shouted out their frustration, and the indifference of the Conservative government during the fifties added fuel to fire. Consequently, The Labour Party committed itself with unprecedented vigour to rally support for a national system of comprehensive schools to immune working-class pupils against the social injustices of the eleven-plus exam. When Labour came back to office in 1964, Harold Wilson missed his chance to institutionalise ‘comprehensivisation.’ The domination-and-assertion relationship between the Conservative and the Labour Party during the seventies compelled Labour Prime Minister James Callaghan to end the injustices inherent in the *Education Act of 1944* once and for all by introducing the short-lived *Act of 1976*. All previous Labour socialist education aspirations had evaporated after the Conservative victory in the general election of 1979. The alternation between the Conservatives (and the establishment) and Labour (and the trade unionists) in a domination-and-assertion model of relationship provided leverage for some (inconsequential) educational reforms despite the commonly accepted political theory of party political consensus.

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