



Grammar schools. Hmm...

Before my job in this parish, I was a school chaplain at Archbishop Tenison's School in Lambeth. For much of the 20th Century, this was a successful grammar school: in 1973 came decision time: should it preserve its selective status (meaning it went independent—in other words, private), or should it become a comprehensive school?

Its founding mission from 1685 was to the poor children of London so it decided to go comprehensive. That's how it is today.

While I was at Tenison's, we had a visit from an alumnus, the Right Reverend Stephen Conway, who is now the Bishop of Ely; I think I invited him to preach. He was brought up in the Sixties in a one bedroom flat in Stockwell, but by passing the 11+ exam, ended up in Tenison's, where he thrived. He went onto Cambridge University, where his nascent faith grew, he took up holy orders and is now in one of the most senior posts in the Church of England. He's just one in a generation of men and women who are now in their fifties and sixties for whom a grammar school education was a route out of poverty into influence. They are all over the upper echelons of British life, and, crucially, Theresa May is one of them. From their perspective, having gained so much, it must be hard not to see grammar schools as a good thing.

After all, what is Archbishop Tenison's School like today? What is clear is that Tenison's doesn't send children to Cambridge University any more; at least no successful candidate has gone there in the 21st Century.

Rather, it is a school that mostly gets just-above average results. Ofsted all it 'good'. The middle classes who live locally generally steer clear of it, because they don't quite feel it's 'for them', so it now almost exclusively caters for the poorer children of London. Thus, it embodies its founding mission, but there is no doubt that it is no longer the driver of social mobility that it once was.

The other thing about that generation of men and women in their fifties and sixties is that 80% of them didn't go to grammar school. There's someone in my congregation who tells me he can still remember finding out that he had failed the 11+, and he reckons that he is still dealing with that sense of failure even today (despite going on to a successful career). The success of the few was at the detriment of the many.

So I've got mixed feelings about the proposals for new grammar schools. I can see how, back in the day, they did work for a few 'kids from the backstreets': look at the Bishop of Ely and others. But would that happen today? I doubt it. Middle class, pushy parents (and I write as one of them) would soon work out how to game the system.

And what gets me angry is the false dream that a new grammar school is at no cost to neighbouring schools: you create a grammar school and you turn the local comprehensive (which may be working well) into a secondary modern. You create one success at 11; you create four children bearing the burden of failure. That cost is perilously high: I'm very wary.

September 2016. Thought for the Train is a short column written by the Reverend Robert Stanier, the vicar of St Andrew and St Mark, Surbiton, for people to read on the train, or elsewhere. www.surbitonchurch.org.uk.