



BOOK REVIEW

## Piers Legh. *The Conservative Party and the Destruction of Selective Education in Post-War Britain: The Great Evasion*

London: Bloomsbury, 2023. Pp. 256. \$115.00 (cloth).

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In this interesting and well-researched book, Piers Legh argues that the *Conservative Party* has been crucial to the development of comprehensive education in the UK, influencing the form and shape that it has taken since the early twentieth century. The book is extremely detailed, and would certainly be of considerable interest and use to those researching and teaching on education policy or Conservative party domestic policy-making in the twentieth century (although the book does expand out to the Boris Johnson era, so could easily argue that it covers the first years of the twenty-first century as well). Each chapter is informative, descriptive, and an excellent account of the key events in education policy, with some excellent analysis of the underlying causes and impacts of different policies or personnel changes at the Department for Education. The author should be praised for this. Covering the entire twentieth century in policy terms is no mean feat. Not only do the people change, often the policies and priorities change enormously, and the author shows a depth of understanding of the key issues here.

I do, however, have some lingering doubts over the stated aim of the book. The book itself is very good, and justified in its own right, but Legh argues something very specific. He argues that the *Conservative Party* is often thought to be preoccupied with the grammar school model of selective education and that its interest in comprehensive education has been limited. Conversely, the interests of the Labour Party in selective education have been assumed to be overshadowed by its commitment to more equality in the education system. “It is a commonly made assumption that the Labour Party are opposed to selection and grammar schools in the interest of equality, while the Conservatives very much believe in the meritocracy and back grammar schools to the hilt with committed fervour. However, I shall show in this book that the truth historically has not been so simple” (1), Legh writes. I think that this claim might be somewhat exaggerated, although that does not fundamentally undermine the excellent research and work that is evident in this book.

While it is clear from a reading of Legh’s work that the Conservatives have been very keen to maintain certain key elements of the education system, including the selective nature of it and the ability of some parents to pay for their child’s education, most British politics academics would argue that the impact of the *Conservative Party* on comprehensive schooling in the UK has been huge. There is no doubt about such a thing. As Secretary of State for Education in the Heath government, Margaret Thatcher introduced more comprehensive schools to the UK than Anthony Crosland had under Wilson, despite his desire to encourage the proliferation of comprehensive schools. Conversely, many Labour politicians have sent their own children to grammar schools, and selective education has not been eradicated in the UK. Perhaps the middle ground is where both parties sit, with the Conservatives

more supportive of selective education but accepting of the comprehensive school model and the reverse being true for Labour. Neither is currently seriously committed to eradicating either model, so we have to assume they have no great hatred of either.

That minor issue put to one side, this is an excellent book with a wide range. I would recommend it to students and academics alike. It also recognizes the fact that education policy has been something of a poor relation in academic writing. While there are some excellent examples, the library of books focused on the policy-making behind education policy has not been as extensive as other policy areas, and this book makes a considerable contribution to that field.