

Why independent schools enjoy being independent

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The Labour Conference votes to abolish independent schools. Social media have come up with witty suggestions about what to do with the great estates of Stowe, Eton, Wellington and Winchester once they are requisitioned.

Anyone who has attended the annual Festival of Education at Wellington College will know what I mean.

So as minds turn to thinking the unthinkable, let's pause to reflect on why the independent sector rightly values its independence.

1. **Freedom from Ofsted** (another Labour Conference abolition target). I have argued for many years that Ofsted and the Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI) should be merged. If the best practice is taken from both, all schools in the land could be inspected to a common framework, judged by their *aims* first, their *outcomes* second. That would be a prize.
2. **Freedom from 'key stages'**. If there is one aspect of current state primary and secondary education that needs fundamental reform, it is the embedded vocabulary of the key stages. No teacher I meet in an independent school uses this vocabulary. This frees them to think about a child's learning journey from 3-16, unhindered by artificial assessment points and the unholy curriculum discontinuities between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3.
3. **Freedom from orthodoxies**. I have been reviewing and inspecting schools in the UK and internationally for the past 20 years. In the state sector, significantly influenced by DfE and Ofsted preoccupations, inspection teams have variously focused on orthodoxies of the day - from literacy hours and Progress 8 to Every Child Matters and (that dreadful current term) 'curriculum buckets'. Headteachers and governing bodies have jumped accordingly.

In contrast, independent and international schools have been free to stick to what they know makes for a great education: celebrating the liberal arts, balancing knowledge and skills, embedding cultural capital, providing great opportunities for sport. And doing this without looking over their shoulders.

Teachers in independent schools are free to teach their subject, and share their passions, skills and knowledge without fear of contradiction from a passing educational fad or fashion. And, in an era of abolition, they are even soon to be free of the Common Entrance exam.

There is something healthy in the air in the classrooms, corridors and staff rooms of independent schools which allows teachers to relax into their work. They are liberated to be themselves, not servants of state education orthodoxies. And their pupils sense it too.

That said, small and large independent schools, home and abroad, do have their own preoccupations. Teacher recruitment and retention causes as much angst as it does for state headteachers, alongside the pressures of recruiting pupils in a competitive marketplace and the unsustainable rise in school fees. Not to mention the *de facto* pledge by many universities to look less favourably on applicants from the private sector.

If the independent sector goes the way of secondary modern schools, grammar schools, technical schools and polytechnics – largely abolished in the past fifty years – state education needs to cherry pick that sector's best features before it disappears.

A great education teaches children to see the world through strangers' eyes. Too often as adults we fail to see the world through others' eyes, and are the poorer for it. From the independent perspective, a fresh look is needed at the strait-jacket within which the state system of schooling currently operates.

The recent Labour Conference reminds us that in a democracy how we educate our children, and in which contexts, is a matter of politics. A time will surely come when politics will enable a sensible fusion of state and independent education, in the best interests of all the nation's children. A start could be made by the [Social Mobility Commission](#).
