

Academic-vocational apartheid

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It is fifteen years ago that the National Education Trust published in its Counterblasts series my pamphlet 'Academic - Vocational Apartheid'. Much of the text had its origins in a speech I drafted a couple of years earlier for the then HMCI Sir David Bell.

He and I were similarly inspired by 'Half Our Future', John Newsom's landmark report in 1963 to the government of the day. Three of its principal recommendations read:

The school programme in the final year ought to be deliberately outgoing - an invitation into the adult world of work and of leisure.

The schools should resist external pressures to extend public examinations to pupils for whom they are inappropriate.

Extended workshop and technical facilities should be provided whether wholly within the schools or jointly with further education.

These recommendations - about preparing for adult life, about examinations, and about collaboration between schools and colleges - resonate down the years.

Technical Schools in the 1960s were never given a chance to flourish, withering in the wake of Harold Wilson's infamous pledge that comprehensive education would offer a grammar school for all. Fast-forward four decades. The Tomlinson Report of 2004 - which promised significant reform to better balance the academic and the vocational - failed to gain Prime Minister Blair's support. In 2005 the Secretary of State's '14 - 19 Education & Skills' document wearily acknowledged that vocational education had often failed to command the confidence of employers, higher education and the general public.

Down the years, the UK education system has seen a flurry of acronyms come and go from TVEI, CPVE and GNVQ to Diplomas and now T Levels.

John Newsom, very much of his time yet with some foresight, observed:

'Vocational' is a dangerous but indispensable word. It rightly means all that belongs to a man's calling. That itself is no doubt an old fashioned word, but at least it suggests that there is more to a job than money.'

There must be many of us for whom, on a personal level, leaving school or college and pursuing a vocation meant taking up a calling: to teach, to nurse, to be an architect, to be a minister of the church. There may be others who readily and properly interpret 'vocational' as learning a skill or a trade.

Yet perhaps it is time for all who are charged with shaping the future for young people to think of vocational education as preparing *equally* to be an electrician, an IT consultant, a pilot, a vicar, a carer, a mechanic, a hairdresser or an inspector of prisons.

As in many other contexts in our contemporary world, we find ourselves confined by the historic associations of language. 'Trades' and 'professions' are such an example. We need to bury the vocational-academic apartheid - and its accompanying 'either/or' vocabulary which so bedevils the current curriculum and examination frameworks within schools, further and higher education.

And this November 2022 may just offer a special window for change.

A newly installed technocrat in Number 10 (the first PM with an MBA), a Secretary of State for Education who left school at 16 to follow an apprenticeship, and a Minister in Robert Halfon who has a distinguished track record in championing the skills agenda for young people.

Can these leading politicians prompt the much-needed step change to raise the profile of vocational education which has eluded their predecessors for 60 years? Can they move beyond the rhetoric to trigger sustained change in how our society values skills as much as knowledge? Can they come anywhere close to signalling a system which is bread and butter to the Germans and Swiss?

This cannot be achieved overnight but it *can* be done over time through the concerted attention of professional associations, trades unions, teachers, lecturers, inspectors, civil servants, business, the media - and, crucially, by politicians who are personally invested in shaping a fresh landscape.