

Tullett Prebon Research, a blog by Dr Tim Morgan

Education – the neglected second purpose

by Tim Morgan on September 17, 2012

Michael Gove is to be commended if, as billed, the reforms being unveiled today aim to replace discredited GCSEs with a more rigorous examination based on the old O-level system. Strident opposition to this proposal is to be expected, not least because there has been a national tendency to overlook the fact that a country's education system should have **two** purposes, not one.

Obviously, a primary purpose of education is to ensure that each child reaches his or her full potential. This, incidentally, highlights the critical difference between the broad role of 'education' and the narrower purpose of 'training'.

Unfortunately, there has long been a tendency – not just in Britain, but throughout much of the Western world – to ignore the second, equally-vital purpose of our investment in education. As well as enabling children to fulfil their full potential, the education system also needs to produce future leaders. Ultimately, the success or failure of an economy will depend upon how good our schools are at identifying and nurturing the scientists, inventors, entrepreneurs, innovators and leaders of the future.

In China, identifying future leaders is a duty that schools are required to fulfil. Perhaps this explains why, whereas Barack Obama is a lawyer, Hu Jintao graduated in hydraulic engineering, and Wen Jiabao is a postgraduate engineer. China has a reported 3.7 million engineering students, whereas just 65,000 Americans graduate in engineering each year – and are outnumbered by law graduates in a ratio of 41:1.

In Britain, the grammar school system used to co-opt the brightest children from what was then called "the working class". Since that ladder was pulled away, the higher reaches of government (in particular) have tended increasingly to become a preserve of the privately-educated. In other words, we are trying to draw most of our leaders from just 7% of our young people.

This simply cannot make sense. Time and again, British (and European) history shows the sheer folly of depending for leadership upon a narrow, privileged class. Any system which fails to identify and promote the brightest minds from **all** social backgrounds is turning its back on its most important resource.

Let me be clear here. Public schools are amongst our most valued institutions, but the abolition of the selective grammar school system has shielded them from competition, just as it has denied huge numbers of our brightest children a realistic route to the top. The one-shot 'eleven plus' system was gravely flawed, not least in its exclusion of late developers and its fostering of complacency, but an exam-based system of annual interchange would have been a much better idea than abolition.

If we are to access talent from all income groups, a system of selection based upon ability (rather than on parental circumstances alone) is clearly required. Even so, and despite their ritual rhetorical commitment to "social mobility", I'm not expecting our public-school-educated leaders to bring back selective education any time soon.

Funny, that.