

## **Tristram Hunt Speech: The Lessons from London Challenge**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Thank you. As ever, it is a great pleasure to be here at Keele University.

A 'People's University' that emerged out of its associations with the North Staffordshire Workers Educational Association and the Stoke-on-Trent Labour movement.

Which may or may not be why its education department is seen by the Secretary of State to be a legitimate battlefield for an almighty ideological confrontation.

Indeed, it does strike me as a rather perverse that if we want our teachers to continually reflect upon their craft and practice;

If we want our schools to become reflexive centres of analysis and enquiry;

And if we want to disseminate evidence of best and next practice throughout our education system;

That we would seek to shut out outstanding and academically rigorous higher education departments like this one and reduce initial teacher training entirely to a school-based model. Let me assure you, that is not my vision.

But we have not gathered here today to talk about initial teacher training - though no conference on pupil learning can avoid the issue of teaching quality for too long.

No rather we have come here to talk about London.

Now, delegates who read the local North Staffordshire newspaper will be aware that I do not always portray London entirely in a positive light when it comes to its impact on issues such as infrastructure spending and the correct balance for the nation's economy.

But when it comes to education then London has an awful lot to offer the rest of us in terms of its recent experience.

And there is one policy initiative, responsible for a startling transformation in the performance of secondary schools, that we would be particularly well advised to examine.

I speak of course of the London Challenge programme launched by Estelle Morris in 2003 and led by, amongst others, Tim Brighouse and Jon Coles, both of whom we are very fortunate to have with us today.

### **LEARNING FROM LONDON**

It seems difficult to gauge from the contemporary vantage point, but it is impossible to understate just how profound has been the turn-around of the capital's schools since London Challenge's inception.

Back in 2003 London was the worst performing English region on practically every educational outcome.

Parents were fleeing the inner city en masse in order to avoid having to send their children to the local state schools - a far cry from the sharp-elbowed bun-fight we often see today.

And if you had said back then that just over a decade later areas like Hackney, Hounslow, Tower Hamlets and Camden would all be in the top ten areas of the country for secondary schools, you would have risked being roundly ridiculed.

Yet indisputably that is the case today. And especially so when we begin to look at the attainment gap and the performance of disadvantaged children.

Fully 80% of Free School Meal children currently reach the expected standards of literacy in KS2 and on this metric, one of the best predictors of long-term attainment, the top ten local authorities are all in London.

It is a similar story in secondary schools where half of all young Londoners from disadvantaged backgrounds achieve 5 good GCSE's including English and Maths. For the rest of the country the average is 1 in 3.

Indeed, so successful has been the turn-around that now educationalists are beginning to argue that London schools may also be amongst the best schools in an urban environment anywhere in the world.

And whilst we will have to wait for the next round of the OECDs PISA survey in 2016 for that to be ratified, to even countenance such a claim illustrates the sharp progress that has been made since the start of the last decade.

There can be little doubt that such a transformation ranks as one of the great achievements of the last Labour Government, if not one of the great public policy successes of the last 50 years.

Now, there is at present a lively academic and media debate as to precisely how big a role for that success can be ascribed to London Challenge on its own.

For example, it seems pretty safe to suggest that changing ethnicity demographics and general labour market attractiveness may also have had an impact at some level.

Meanwhile, there a whole host of other policy initiatives that might also have contributed - from Teach First, to the Sponsored Academy Programme, Excellence in Cities and the National Literacy and Numeracy strategies.

And the Institute for Fiscal Studies is absolutely right to highlight an equally remarkable up-turn in primary standards just prior to Challenge's launch.

Yet I would argue it is perhaps a category mistake to even conceive of the London Challenge as an instrumental public policy intervention in this way.

No doubt Tim, Jon and others will correct me if I am wrong, but throughout the evolution of the Challenge, the programme used a wide-range and diffuse set of levers in terms of policy interventions. Including some, like Teach First and Sponsored Academies, which have already been mentioned.

And this, I think, highlights an important point about place based social reform strategies: there is no off-the-peg solution; no one-size fits all structure or system that will work in every area, all of the time.

Yes, high performing systems and structural reforms often share many important features. But ultimately there are no easy answers and the London Challenge is a perfect example of this, evolving over time as it did and developing as a response to local conditions, need and personalities.

That is often difficult for us Westminster based politicians to conceptualise because, ultimately, it means letting go - devolving power and trusting the moral mission of committed public servants and outstanding school leaders.

But in the case of London it resulted in a far more profound achievement, what one might call the holy grail of all holistic reform programmes. It is the reason why its legacy will, I would argue, prove so durable.

That is: it challenged then changed the philosophy of education across a whole urban area, leaving a lasting mark upon the entire system culture of the region.

That change went, in its own words: from "you can't expect more from children from these sorts of backgrounds" to "with our help all children can succeed: deprivation is not destiny".

And it is precisely this intolerance of excuses and ethos of high expectations that I want to spread across the whole of England.

### **SPREADING SUCCESS, ENCOURAGING EXCELLENCE**

But the crucial question is of course, how do we achieve it?

How do we spread success, encourage excellence and make sure that poverty places no cap upon individual aspiration?

Ladies and Gentleman, the Labour Party has a clear structural answer to this.

As recommended by David Blunkett in his recent report, we would introduce a Director of School Standards to work across local authority areas. This appointment would then be responsible for brokering collaboration, spreading best practice, encouraging innovation, monitoring data, overseeing safeguarding issues and, above all, intervening quickly if underperformance begins to take root.

In part this policy is motivated by our longstanding argument - demonstrated with a depressing vehemence in Birmingham - that neither the Department of Education, the local education authority, or Her Majesty's Inspectorate, have the wherewithal or resources to properly oversee all our schools.

However, it is also an attempt to nurture the right collaborative structures; to inculcate the hard-edged partnership and challenge that we believe is necessary for a systemic and dedicated national strategy for school improvement.

Yet I am acutely aware of the contradiction inherent in imposing a Director of School Standards from the centre and my argument that there is no 'one-size fits all' solution.

That is why we have in no way dictated the spatial dimension for the Director of School Standards - we want local authorities to come together, draw up a plan of shared objectives, take ownership and begin that vital process of bottom-up collaboration.

Nevertheless, there is still a delicate but absolutely crucial balance to be struck between making sure there is sufficient resources, power and political 'grip' for the Director of School Standards to operate effectively, whilst at the same time stopping the structure from becoming claustrophobic - either to the DSS itself or, more importantly, to school leaders.

Again, there are no obvious clues to guaranteeing this balance - London Challenge was itself iterative and I am as eager as anyone to learn more about its evolution over time and its relationship with the centre.

But I do want to make it absolutely clear that we do not want heavy-handed, interventionist or confrontational Directors of School Standards.

What we want is a light-touch system where collaboration is allied with hard-edged partnership, where the profession is properly engaged and motivated, where outstanding teachers and head-teachers are empowered to raise standards, and where there is no tolerance of low expectations or excuses made for a poverty of ambition.

I am under absolutely no illusions that nurturing this ethos will be a tremendous challenge for an education system that at times can seem a little dominated by a high stakes, managerial, target driven performance culture.

But ladies and gentleman, surely that has to be what English education aspires towards?

### **A WORLD CLASS TEACHER IN EVERY CLASSROOM, STUDIO OR WORKSHOP**

Yet arguably our first aspiration must be to raise the status, elevate the standing and lift the standards of teaching in this country.

The evidence appears to be absolutely unequivocal on this: the surest way to improve our children's attainment is by raising the standard, standing and status of teaching in our schools and colleges.

Yes, innovation, accountability and autonomy – underpinned by safeguards and minimum standards – matter enormously.

Yes, getting collaborative structures, school to school support and place-based partnership right is crucial too.

But what the evidence tells us is that often there is greater variation in performance and progress within a school than between schools.

Without question it is teacher quality that makes the biggest difference to raising school standards and any keen student of the London Challenge will now how assiduously the programme's leaders worked upon establishing an aspirational vision of 'The London Teacher'.

Yet what makes improving teaching quality so crucial to us in the Labour Party is that like the London Challenge programme we realise it is also the surest way to deliver on our broader social mission

Because its importance is even more pronounced when it comes to children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Research from the Sutton Trust has shown that without social capital or parental input to fall back upon, teacher quality can mean as much as a year's difference to the learning progress of disadvantaged children.

And the Education Select Committee's shocking report into the underperformance in white working class boys and girls only reinforces those findings.

So the animating purpose of my tenure as Education Secretary in the next Labour Government would be to make sure we have a world class teacher in every classroom, studio or workshop - a highly qualified, self-motivating and dedicated professional workforce that reflects upon the evidence and continually enquires about its own craft and practice.

Now, I don't want to be overly partisan today - but surely few can disagree that an ambitious, high aspiration vision for English teaching should begin by making sure all teachers are qualified or on a pathway to gaining qualified status.

However, Qualified Teacher Status is the bare minimum we should expect. It is the correct place for a teacher to begin their professional development, but it absolutely must not be the end.

What is more, if we want to bring about a radical step change across the entire system, if we want to make a meaningful difference for children in today's classroom as well as tomorrow's, then the traditional policy response of focusing almost exclusively upon reforming initial teacher training and attracting new entrants to the profession, will not be sufficient.

Because what that Sutton Trust and London School of Economics research also highlighted is that if we could just raise the performance of the least effective teachers already in the system merely to the average, then England would rank in the top five education systems in the world in reading and mathematics.

And it is that tantalising prospect which motivates us in the Labour Party to think about new ways of improving teacher quality across the board.

Now there will be many small but important reforms needed in order to achieve this.

How we boost the infrastructure for collective and disseminating evidence; how we develop a framework for quality assuring training and professional development; how we encourage teachers to take ownership of developing ambitious, clear and agreed professional standards - all these questions will require an answer.

But I think we must begin by making sure teachers undertake the best professional development more frequently; by encouraging them to use evidence to reflect upon their practice and hone their craft; and by expecting them to revalidate their expertise at regular intervals throughout their career.

Because I believe that, given the pace of progress, an understanding of the latest pedagogical or technological innovations is sure to benefit pupils.

And I believe that a process of re-validating teachers' expertise would bring them into line with other high-status, mature professions such as lawyers, doctors and accountants.

But I also believe that we need to look at new ways of encouraging the best teachers to carry on teaching in the classroom, as well as attracting them to the most challenging schools.

It simply cannot be right that the best teachers feel they need to go into management or leadership just to advance their careers and we to give teachers who want to build their expertise in a particular subject or pedagogical skills the opportunity to progress whilst still practicing the craft that first attracted them to the calling.

So, as well as reversing the Government's policy on unqualified teachers; as well as making sure we attract high calibre graduates and career switchers and prepare them properly for the pressures of the profession; we will listen to teachers and we will work with teachers in order to draw up a framework of new career pathways for teachers loosely based on the Singaporean system – one of the world's leading education jurisdictions.

With the Chartered London Teacher status, the London Challenge programme developed an excellent response to this issue - and that is a model we are looking closely at too.

Because more than anything, what I am interested in is empowering teachers to be all they can and should be – professionals whose job is so important it requires the very highest levels of performance.

That is how we raise school standards and give children – especially those from disadvantaged urban communities – the best opportunity to fulfil their potential.

## **EXCELLENCE FOR ALL**

But the truth is that we must extend this focus, this drive to deliver an excellent education for all, beyond schools and into colleges.

So our priority has to be an education system which allows learners to pursue excellence in vocational as well as academic pathways.

Clearly, this goes beyond the classroom:

We need to drive up the quality of apprenticeships by making them all level 3 and last a minimum of two years;

We need to deliver a sharper focus for Further Education by accrediting the best colleges as new Institutes of Technical Education to deliver gold-standard technical learning;

And we need to finally make sure there is an alignment between further education colleges and local labour markets.

This strikes to the heart of one of the most fundamental challenges we face as a nation and it is always worth restating that the rupture in our economy between growth and rising living standards actually dates back to around 2003 - long before 2008's financial crash.

And the fact remains that smaller urban areas like Stoke-on-Trent, Grimsby, Middlesbrough, Hull have struggled to find a place in the globalising economy, following de-industrialisation.

Speak to any business leader about their biggest challenges and one of the first things they will say is skills.

So there is no getting around it: if we are to compete in the global economy; if we want high wages, high innovation and a rebalanced economy, we need the best skilled workforce in the world.

Now, to my mind there is a clear correlation between the areas of educational underperformance and struggling local labour markets.

Our challenges are no longer the big inner cities - they are the isolated rural communities, former mining villages and seaside towns. So again, place-based strategies and local collaboration between institutions will have a strong role to play.

Yet if we really want to spread success across the whole of England then we will need to completely tear down the deep-seated cultural barriers that exist between vocational and academic routes.

This summer marks the seventieth anniversary of Rab Butler's 1944 Education Act and, quite frankly, our problems go that far back.

The Technical School aspect of the tripartite system was never fully realised and you could make a convincing case that a lack of focus in vocational education represents the historic failing of the English education system.

What is more, evidence shows that there is a strong correlation between those European countries with the most effective vocational education system and low youth unemployment.

What we need is a clear and coherent strategy for all learners, one that binds different pathways to success together in a rigorous common framework.

That is why I am attracted to a recent report from the Labour Party's skills task-force, which recommended that we develop a National Baccalaureate framework for all pupils aged 14-19.

Based on a three-part 'common core', the National Baccalaureate would mean that in addition to existing A-level or high-quality vocational qualifications, all learners would: study English and maths to 18; undertake an extended study or collaborative project; and would develop their character, resilience and employability skills through a tailored personal development programme that could include work experience or community service.

This should not be seen as more unhelpful curriculum tinkering – the core learning component of the National Baccalaureate would be made up entirely from existing qualifications.

But it is about articulating a broader vision for education: high aspirations for all; a rejection of the exam factory model; and a commitment to developing our young people's character so that they are college ready, career ready, life ready.

Because when we look at the challenges facing our young people today, from global economic competition to increasing mental health problems, then I would argue that the need for a different approach to education, one that delivers excellence and opportunity for all our young people has never been more stark.

## **A DEATH KNEEL FOR LOW EXPECTATIONS**

Now, if we are honest, developing a high quality vocational offer was not part of the London Challenge story.

However, the philosophy that drives my determination to change this certainly was.

Smart use of data; a rigorous focus on pupil progress; the strategic use of new school structures - there are many micro lessons we can learn from London Challenge.

But the biggest one is surely that the complete destruction of the myth that there is a policy choice which needs to be made between doing well for some young people and doing well for all.

The idea that we cannot spread excellence everywhere or that background defines destiny.

Thanks to London Challenge, those ideas no longer have any credibility whatsoever.

We have seen what that even in urban areas like Hackney, Tower Hamlets and Haringey, life chances can be turned around.

We have seen it work with the Raising Achievement Transforming Learning programme and the networks previously brought together by the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust . We are seeing it with the collaborative approaches of forward-thinking local authorities, such as Wigan.

Everywhere, the shameful link between economic status and educational attainment beginning to break down altogether.

That is what I want for our whole education system – and we have seen that it is possible.  
Educational excellence for all *is* attainable.

When schools come together in networks of challenge and collaboration, working together to raise standards and root out underperformance, it is attainable.

When outstanding head-teachers are given the freedom to innovate and make decisions about what is best for their pupils without undue interference from politicians, civil servants or local authorities, it is attainable.

But most of all, when highly qualified and motivated teachers are trusted to awaken the passion for learning that a strong society and a growing economy so desperately need, it is attainable.

Outstanding teachers in exceptional London schools have offered us this tantalising glimpse of what is possible, sounding a decisive death knell for low expectations everywhere.

The Labour Party and myself are committed to following their example.

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