

# Margaret Thatcher: Iron Lady of Charter Schools

by Daniel Tanner

## Abstract

*Documentary history reveals that charter schools are a vestige of the socially divided school system of 19th-century England. The current charter school movement in the United States raises the danger to American democracy of splitting up the U.S. school structure and creating a separate system of schools for other people's children.*

**Key words:** *charter schools, comprehensive secondary school, democracy, privatization, school choice*

**T**he charter-school movement has been widely heralded as an American invention, capturing the American entrepreneurial virtues of free enterprise, challenge, choice, initiative, and privatization (Cross, 1989). Curiously, the prevailing myth that charter schools are an American invention has never been exposed, despite the rich historic record revealing that charter schools originated in 19th-century England as a national system of education. The modern movement for charter schools in the United States actually grew out of the confluence of convictions of two of the most powerful global leaders: Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan.

## A Nation at Risk

As with all sociopolitical movements, the timing had to be right to ignite the charter-school movement in the United States. And so it was that in 1983 a report was issued by the National Commission on

Excellence in Education under the Reagan administration, blaring the ominous title *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*. The opening words of the report warned that the nation's "once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world," and this was the result of "a rising tide of mediocrity" in the nation's schools. "If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war," declared the report on its opening page (p. 5). And, of course, even Sputnik was drawn into the picture. The report so captured the imagination of the media and public that successive presidents from Ronald Reagan to Donald Trump, with the exception of Bill Clinton, proceeded to fix the blame on America's school system for virtually every failure of society, from the nation's decline in economic hegemony in the global marketplace to poverty and crime at home.



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To many citizens, it seemed that the reckless and near hysterical tone of *A Nation at Risk* had put the nation truly at risk (Tanner, 1993). For instead of devising the means of strengthening the structure and function of the nation's unitary school system, yet another kind of school and school system was to be created, principally to serve other people's children instead of all the children of all the people.

### A British Invention

Contrary to the myth, the idea of charter schools predated the American emergence of these institutions by more than a century. Within the British 19th-century class system in England, schooling for ordinary children came to be provided under church and private or voluntary associations increasingly aided by public funds (Cornish, 1910; Johnson, 1987; Maclure, 1986; Murphy, 1971; Weeks, 1986). In effect, the state was reinforcing the social status quo of class differences rather than seeking national unity through education. Not until 1870 was a framework established to fill the gap in elementary education for children not served by the Church of England, religious orders, or private associations. The new framework, however, resulted in a dual system of schools: one retaining the essential features of the old system of religious denominational and private sponsorship, and the other a secular system of schools administered through local education authorities. In the dual structure, the national government provided funding for both systems, although the schools under local education authorities were authorized to draw from local taxes to supplement the government grants (Murphy, 1971).

In the United States, from the common school of the early 19th century, the American people created a system of free, coeducational, tax-supported, secular, locally administered, and state-controlled schools with the explicit purpose of developing a spirit of national unity, or of unity through diversity, in a nation of immigrants. With the end of World War I, plans were implemented for universal secondary education through the creation of the uniquely American comprehensive high school open to all youth (Commission on the Reorganization of

Secondary Education, 1918). This commitment accelerated through the 20th century with increasing state and federal support, leading to the enormous expansion of educational opportunity through the creation of the comprehensive high school, community college, and state university (Tanner & Tanner, 1990).

In England after World War II, the traditional dual system, reflecting the social-class structure, came to be challenged by the newly elected labour government. Coupled with popular demand for the expansion of educational opportunity, the challenge led to the creation of the American-style, unitary, comprehensive secondary school (Crowther, 1959; Glenn, 1989). With the ebb and flow of political victories and defeats in England, the battle over "comprehensives" continued. The victory of the British Labour Party in 1964 resulted in the elimination of the 11-plus examinations that had provided the means for the selection and separation of children at age 11 for the type of secondary school they would attend (Maclure, 1986). Passing the exams meant eligibility for the academic track and entrance to the selective, secondary grammar school, opening the path of opportunity for possible university entrance and social privilege for a select population, whereas the majority of youth entered other types of secondary schools from which they might go on to a technical "college" for vocational training if they did not drop out of school altogether.

When the Conservatives returned to lead the British government in 1970, Margaret Thatcher became Education Secretary and vowed to save the academically selective secondary grammar schools and the connections of government with the denominational and voluntary private schools. Thatcher opposed the requirement for local public education authorities to operate a uniform (i.e., comprehensive) pattern of secondary education (Maclure, 1986).

### Privatization and Thatcherism: Snatching Milk From Babes

As Education Secretary, Thatcher oversaw cuts in the education budget and managed to stir up

great public furor when she closed down the free milk program for primary school children. As the daughter of a greengrocer, she lived with her family in a flat above the grocery in the town of Grantham, England. By dint of ability and ambition, she won a place at Oxford University where she majored in chemistry. Her illustrious political career was marked by an unshakable belief in the virtues of thrift, initiative, and perseverance, and she carried this conviction and spirit of certitude, rectitude, and fortitude into her policies on education and government to the extent that she earned the moniker “Iron Lady” (Aldous, 2012; Edwards, 1989).

With the return of the Labour Party in 1974, the momentum for comprehensive schools accelerated, and in 1976 legislation was enacted requiring local education authorities and schools sponsored by voluntary organizations to develop plans for restructuring their schools along comprehensive lines to qualify for continued government funding. The act also stipulated that admission of students to secondary schools was not to be based on ability or aptitude (Maclure, 1986). But this stipulation was repealed in 1979 with the return of the Conservatives and with Thatcher as the new Prime Minister (Glenn, 1989).

The Conservative party’s platform for the election of 1974 had featured “The Charter for Parents’ Rights” under the slogan of “school choice.” Tory intellectuals headed by Rhodes Boyson led the charge for school choice and, under the Thatcher Revolution, Boyson became Education Secretary. The movement called for standards and market forces to drive out the comprehensive schools in favor of charter schools. The Conservative Election Manifesto of 1979 had declared it the duty of government and the local education authorities to publish prospectuses on schools of choice (Glenn, 1989). Passage of the Education Act of 1980 not only carried these provisions, but also required that the local public education authorities pay the tuition and other costs for children who gained admission to another school authority or to a voluntary (private) or charter school (Department of Education and Science, England, 1981). As Prime Minister, Thatcher continued her championship of parent choice and

her attack against the “monopoly” of free education by the local education authorities (Edwards, 1989).

## **Glasnost and Perestroika: From the USSR to the USA**

With the remarkable rise of Mikhail Gorbachev to General Secretary and President of the Soviet Union in 1985, steps were taken in the USSR to unleash radical reforms for democratization and decentralization of the political and economic system through a policy of “glasnost” (openness) and “perestroika” (restructuring). Not to be outdone, the terms “transparency” and “restructuring” reverberated in the United States in the spheres of government, business, and especially in the call for restructuring of the American public school system. In the summer of 1988, under Gorbachev, the final examinations in History were canceled for Soviet elementary and high-school students on the grounds that the textbooks had presented a dishonest portrayal of the nation’s history (Fein, 1988). With the dismantling of the Soviet Union, relations warmed between Gorbachev and his former adversaries, Reagan and Thatcher. The thaw was to lead to historic nuclear controls and trade agreements with Russia. Although the Cold War was over, the push for restructuring the public school system toward charter schools in the United States had been launched.

In England, there was no turning back from the movement for inclusive comprehensive secondary schools once the parents and general public realized that the unitary restructuring of the school system effected a strong and positive impact on the extension of educational opportunity (Barker, 1986; Baron, 1965; Benn & Chitty, 1997; Burgess, 1983; Weeks, 1986). In studying this transformation firsthand, back in 1975–1976, I had found that many of the more affluent, privileged, and even middle-class parents expressed concern that differences in language and social punctilio—marked by joint association of their children with lower-class children in comprehensive schools—might “rub off” on their own children. But over time, education

and socioeconomic reforms have resulted in a rise of the middle-class population and a more democratically representative student population in the elite universities (Cannadine, 1999). In fact, the American-style comprehensive secondary school had been gaining growing adoption by advanced democratic European nations since the mid-20th century (Conant, 1959).

But in the United States, President Reagan had found the idea of restructuring the nation's schools, with an alternative system of publicly funded charter schools under private management, vastly appealing. Early on in his presidency, Reagan had developed a close relationship of mutual admiration, personally and politically, with Thatcher, and he readily adopted her mission for privatization and charter schools as the centerpiece for his program of national education reform (Edwards, 1989). By the end of the Reagan administration, there would be no retreat.

## Separate and Unequal

This look back at the evolution of charter schools leads one to ponder whether the charter-school movement would have been embraced so easily in the United States if people had realized that the idea was transplanted from 19th-century England. Instead, the American public has been made to believe that the national education reform movement for charter schools is a truly novel American invention—a system to replace the allegedly failed schools of the nation's inner cities—and that an alternative system of schools, allowing for parental choice and operating by the forces of the free market and private enterprise, will bring a new level of efficiency to public education for other people's children.

The great and unique accomplishment of creating a unitary and inclusive public school system in America was fueled by rejection of the divided system in England, which reflected and perpetuated the divisions in social class. The American democratic prospect held that a nation of immigrants required a unitary and publicly supported universal system of schools. It is ironic

that a unified and inclusive public school system, so laboriously and lovingly created in advancing the democratic prospect, should be so readily and eagerly dismantled and divided.

If there is a lesson to be learned from history, the forces for a unitary school system will prevail if only because a nation of immigrants requires a commitment to a common sharing of discourse, understanding, and competence by all the people. But if it should turn out that the charter-school movement succeeds in splitting up the American school system, at least some, if not much, of the credit must be given to Margaret Thatcher, the Iron Lady. ■

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