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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Ruskin Speech and Great Debate in English education, 1976–1979: A study of motivation

James Silverwood[1] | Peter Wolstencroft[2]

[1]Bishop Grosseteste University, Lincoln, UK

[2]Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, UK

Correspondence
Peter Wolstencroft, Liverpool John Moores University, Redmonds Building, Brownlow Hill, Liverpool L3 5UG, UK.
Email: p.j.wolstencroft@ljmu.ac.uk

Abstract
James Callaghan's speech at Ruskin College, Oxford in October 1976 is widely considered a pivotal moment in modern English educational policy. Whilst it is not our intention to challenge this fundamental point, the paper will critically interrogate some long-held assumptions about the motivation that led Callaghan to deliver his speech at Ruskin College. Specifically, the paper will argue that the Ruskin Speech, which spawned a subsequent great debate on education, was motivated by a desire to protect and support comprehensive education, rather than generate more fundamental and radical educational reform away from those principles. Where successive governments have referred back to the ideals espoused by the speech as justification for subsequent educational transformation away from comprehensive ideals, this has only served to imbue the Ruskin Speech and Great Debate with motivations that were not shared at the time by Callaghan and his Labour government.

KEYWORDS
archival research, Callaghan, education policy, Ruskin

INTRODUCTION

One way to measure the relevance and political significance of an event is to see the reaction to its anniversary by those invested in the sector. On this metric alone, despite it being nearly half a century since James Callaghan (1976b) rose at Ruskin College in October 1976 to deliver his much-heralded intervention on the state of education in the UK, it is clear

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Key insights

What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

This paper looks at the motivations behind James Callaghan's speech at Ruskin College. It uses extensive archival research to identify the reasons for the speech before the date it was delivered rather than using hindsight.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

Our results suggest that the speech was motivated by a desire to protect and support comprehensive education, rather than generate more fundamental and radical educational reform away from those principles.

that Callaghan's speech retains enduring interest and remains firmly lodged within political consciousness. For example, 20 years on, in his own lecture at Ruskin College, Tony Blair (1996) echoed Callaghan's words as a means to legitimise his own strategy to restore the electoral fortunes of the Labour party through an emphasis on 'education, education, education'. Since then, successive governments have lined up to laud the Ruskin Speech as the inspiration behind their own attempts at educational reform (Adonis, 2006; Gibb, 2016). The twenty-fifth anniversary saw the *Guardian* publish a series of articles offering a retrospective on the Ruskin Speech, culminating with an interview with Callaghan exploring its relationship to the contemporary state of education in Britain (Woodward, 2001a, 2001b), whilst the fortieth anniversary saw a public seminar held in the House of Lords. It is perhaps little wonder that Callaghan (2001) would reflect on this recurrent attention and consider, of all his speeches, that Ruskin was the 'best remembered'.

There is good reason why Callaghan's speech at Ruskin continues to generate interest and comment, with several themes espoused by Callaghan able to be traced forward into initiatives that have since come to dominate the English educational system (Simmons, 2008). Notable amongst these have been the concentration of power within an official regulatory body, Ofsted, who have steered an approach towards universal standards (Coffield, 2017), the introduction of a national curriculum, an increased focus on quantitative measures to ensure a universality of delivery (Ball, 2003) and strengthening of the link between education and employment. Elsewhere, discussions addressed by Callaghan on the supposed limitations of progressive teaching methods (originally espoused by Dewey, 1915), concerns over standards in English and Maths (Education and Training Foundation, 2015; HM Government, 2011), and the dichotomy of ensuring a personalised educational provision while maintaining consistency of standards (Courtney et al., 2017) are all arguments that remain both valid and extensively discussed today.

For these reasons, the Ruskin speech is often conceptualised as a 'tipping' or 'turning' point in the contemporary history of the English education system (Aldrich, 1996, p. 4, Barber, 2016; Brooks, 1991, p. 4, Phillips & Harper-Jones, 2002, p. 297). Here, authors conceive, either wittingly or unwittingly, of the Ruskin speech as a 'critical juncture' (Donnelly & Hogan, 2012) in which an event (e.g., the Ruskin speech) catapults public policy (in this case education in England) onto a radical new trajectory by introducing new norms and rules. Ergo, in such historical understanding, the Ruskin speech is elevated as the wellspring of the modern English educational system, as demonstrated in commentary in 2016 to mark its fortieth anniversary (Carmichael, 2016; Millar, 2016).

There consequently exists much agreement that James Callaghan's speech at Ruskin College was an important milestone in the history of education in England. However, as we

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approach the fiftieth anniversary of the Ruskin Speech in 2026, we believe there is a need for a critical re-examination of the event. This is something we seek to achieve in this paper by critically inspecting the speech not with the benefit of hindsight of knowing the subsequent trajectory of the English educational system, but by relocating it within the historical context in which it was delivered.

Consequently, we aim to deliver a discrete investigation into the educational policymaking of James Callaghan and his Labour government between 1976 and 1979. Our ambition is to challenge the conventional narrative associated with the Ruskin speech outlined above, questioning the motivation behind the Callaghan's intervention in educational matters at Ruskin College.

In order to orientate the reader, the paper begins with a brief descriptive overview of the Ruskin Speech from inception to aftermath. It proceeds with a literature review exploring existing explanations for the motivation behind the Ruskin speech. This section serves a dual purpose for the reader in also placing the Ruskin speech within its contemporary political and economic context. The paper continues with an explanation of our research method. It culminates with a critical examination of evidence that emerged from documentary research of materials located in the National Archives. In this part of the paper, findings from archival research pertaining to the motivation for delivery of the Ruskin Speech are triangulated with data derived from other primary literature, especially the autobiographies and memoirs of participants directly involved in educational policymaking between 1976 and 1979, as well as their contribution to parliamentary debate in the House of Commons.

The paper makes two specific contributions. Our first contribution relates to the methodological approach, with documentary analysis of archival material produced by central government elevated as our main method of primary data collection—an approach that remains relatively rare in educational research on policymaking where the gathering of primary data via interview remains a dominant research method. Indeed, a comprehensive review of literature on the Ruskin Speech (and UK education more broadly) by the authors found only one other example of data collection from archival material produced by the British central government in an unpublished thesis (Jervis, 2011).

Our second contribution is to deliver fresh empirical findings about the motivation surrounding Callaghan's intervention into educational issues in his speech at Ruskin College. Here, archival sources appear to confirm that the strongest motivation for the speech stemmed primarily from the desire to defend and support comprehensive education. Our finding consequently corresponds with what we characterise below as the 'domestic political' explanation of motivation behind the Ruskin speech.

THE RUSKIN SPEECH: BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER

In hindsight, the content of the Ruskin speech on 8 October 1976 should hardly have been a surprise to the educational establishment, with several of its major themes having been trailed by the Prime Minister previously. For instance, the end of Callaghan's (1976a) speech to the Labour Party conference that same year saw him ruminate on progressive teaching methods (Sherman, 2009) and their perceived failure to prepare students adequately for employment (Lowe, 2007). In addition to this, the Department of Education and Science (DES) produced a Yellow Book on education, the result of a series of questions posed by Callaghan in his initial interactions with Fred Mulley, Secretary of State for Education (1975–76), after his elevation to Prime Minister. The Yellow Book was intended to be a confidential document, but was notoriously leaked several days before the Ruskin speech, causing a vociferous response from educationalists (Lawton, 2018). It acknowledged parental suspicion that teaching methods were undermining performance in reading, writing and arith-

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metic, questioned the 'variation in curriculum' between schools throughout the country and touched upon the need to enhance vocational provision within educational establishments (Chitty, 1991, p. 139–150). It was this flurry of intervention so early in his Prime Ministership, which included his speech at Ruskin College, that has seen Callaghan develop an historic reputation as a keen contributor to educational policy (Lowe, 2004).

Callaghan (1976b) articulated four major themes at Ruskin College. The first was the need for the education system to develop greater links with industry to better prepare students to enter the workforce with Callaghan voicing 'complaints from industry that new recruits from schools sometimes do not have the basic tools to do the job that is required' (Hickson & Miles, 2020, p. 164). The second was to repeat the questioning of progressive teaching methods being deployed in schools, which critics had associated with questions posed by industry about the perceived falling educational ability of school leavers (Lowe, 2007). The third was to side himself with those who argued that the educational system would benefit from 'a basic curriculum with universal standards' (Callaghan, 1976b). The final theme was the role of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Schools 'in relation to national standards' and the 'monitoring [of] the use of resources'.

Callaghan's intervention at Ruskin was considered only the start, the speech launching a so-called Great Debate on education involving government, educational and industrial representatives. This Great Debate began with a number of preliminary meetings between the DES and representatives from educational and industrial organisations. To stimulate discussion in these meetings, the DES produced a paper titled 'Schools in England and Wales: Current Issues—An Annotated Agenda for Discussion' outlining topics for discussion under four headings of curriculum, monitoring/assessment, teacher training, and school and working life. These paved the way for eight regional conferences lasting one day held between February and March 1977 for which DES prepared a background paper called 'Educating our Children'. Invitees to these regional conferences included parents, employers, trade unionists and DES nominees amongst others. The eventual four topics taken into these regional conferences were the mirror-image of those identified in the 'Annotated Agenda for Discussion'. The Great Debate has been subject of several criticisms, including insufficient attention to the format, that the regional conferences did not include all necessary opinion, and the agenda was too concentrated on secondary schooling (Chitty, 1991, p. 177–184).

MOTIVATION BEHIND THE 1976 RUSKIN SPEECH

Continued interest, almost 50 years after its delivery, is indicative of the almost universal unanimity with which the Ruskin speech is considered an important event in the contemporary history of English education (for a rare exception see Jervis, 2011). Questions persist, however, regarding the motivation behind Callaghan's decision to subject education to such scrutiny of its role and purpose with four competing explanations provided in the literature.

We characterise the first as the 'domestic political' explanation in which motivation for the speech is said to have come from the political imperative to deflect criticism of comprehensive education, which by the time Callaghan become Prime Minister in 1976, was coming most vociferously from twin directions.

One of these was the nascent 'New Right' in British politics. Popular at least initially within only a small number of the Conservative parliamentary party, importantly including their leader since 1975, Margaret Thatcher, the ideology of the New Right sought to straddle belief in neoliberalism (the use of state power to ensure markets as the primary allocator of economic resources and guarantor of individual 'freedom') with social conservatism (a respect for 'traditional values' such as family, duty and responsibility; Gamble, 1988; see also Berry, 2022; Williams, 2021). New Right criticism of UK education came largely from its

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social conservatism with the claim that the comprehensive system was causing a diminution of educational standards, an issue explicitly linked to the supposed proliferation of progressive teaching methods and a lack of discipline in comprehensive schools. Such critique was advanced across a series of 'black papers' (Tomlinson, 1989) published between 1969 and 1977 (Cox & Dyson, 1969a, 1969b, 1970; Cox & Boyson, 1975, 1977), with criticisms contained gaining significant amplification in sections of the media (Chitty, 2009, p. 36). Their critique also gained a certain notoriety during the furore caused by events at William Tyndale Primary School in Islington, which were charted in a television documentary. Here, conflict raged between teachers and parents over whether the progressive curriculum was deemed to give insufficient attention to the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic (Demaine, 2002). Consequently, Chitty (2009, p. 45) identifies how the Ruskin speech 'owed much' to the necessity of wresting the 'populist mantle' from Callaghan's political opponents, showing 'an awareness of perceived public disquiet at the alleged decline in educational standards'.

Chitty (2009, pp. 34–36) also locates much disquiet with the performance of comprehensive education in the period within UK business. As early as 1974, a survey by the National Youth Employment Council found that the majority of businesses questioned believed that young workers entering their organisation were unsatisfactorily skilled. The disappointment felt by business was articulated in 1976 in the pages of the *Times Educational Supplement* in two articles written by Sir Arnold Weinstock (Managing Director of the General Electric Company) and John Methven (Director General of the Confederation of British Industry). Respectively titled 'I Blame the Teachers' and 'What Industry Needs', the argument in each showed similarities with the concern for standards emanating from the New Right, positing that the educational system was leaving pupils unprepared for the reality of the world of work through its inability to inculcate a basic level of skills (both practical and social). Chitty (2009, p. 39) subsequently concludes that, by the time of Harold Wilson's resignation in March 1976, 'the Labour Party had been thrown on the [political] defensive by the sheer ferocity and scale of the right-wing attack on its education and social policies'.

The second motivation offered in the literature is the 'social class' explanation. Batteson (1997) argues that Callaghan's interest in education stemmed from his social background, which made him aware of the lack of educational opportunities in his youth and left him convinced of the need to spread the benefits of education widely amongst the populace. Hickson and Miles (2020) have made a similar argument more recently, emphasising that Callaghan's motivation was to ensure elite education was available to everyone, rather than just the offspring of the well-heeled.

The importance of social class is seemingly confirmed by Callaghan in his own autobiography (1987, p. 409), as well as the autobiographies and diaries of important political figures involved in educational policymaking from the period. Bernard Donoughue (1987: 10, 111) (Head of the No.10 Policy Unit and Senior Policy Advisor to Harold Wilson and James Callaghan) and Shirley Williams (2010, pp. 20–21, 59, 222—Secretary of State for the DES, 1976–1979) (see also Hennessey, 2001, p. 378–379), for example, each make much of the fact that Callaghan's social class, and the fact that he had not attended university, were important in shaping his views and subsequent intervention as Prime Minister on education.

The third motivation is the 'international political' explanation in which the speech is portrayed as a product of the 1970s crises of social democracy (Chitty, 1991; Chitty, 2009, p. 45; Finn et al., 2007). A contributor to this 'crisis' was the decision by OPEC member countries to quadruple the price of oil in 1973, which sent shockwaves throughout the global capitalist system, and promoted economic dislocation that exacerbated underlying macroeconomic weaknesses in the UK economy. This included macroeconomic weaknesses excacerbated by the economic policy of the Conservative government of Edward Heath (1970–1974). The Heath administration was far more radical in office than commonly considered, introducing monetary policy that set the UK economy on the path towards financiali-

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sation (Silverwood, 2021). For example, the institution of Competition and Credit Control in 1971 set the UK banking system free from many of the quantitative controls on lending that it had operated under in the post-war system (Copley, 2017). The result was an orgy of lending directed towards the housing market, and when this asset bubble inevitably broke in late 1973, a secondary banking crisis was caused in the UK economy (Reid, 2003, pp. 43–67).

Under twin economic crises of the oil price shock and banking crisis, capital accumulation stalled and the UK economy encountered a period of stagflation (a confluence of low economic growth with rising prices) to which the Keynesian Social Democratic consensus that had existed in UK public policy for much of the post-war period increasingly looked like it had few answers (Hall, 1993). Indeed, as more questions were asked about the efficacy of post-war economic policy, the pressure on other areas of public policy, such as comprehensive education (see discussion on the Black papers), multiplied. Social Democratic governments seen to embody the post-war social and economic consensus were increasingly weakened politically, ceding ground to ideas and beliefs emerging from the New Right.

An example of this, with consequences for education policy, can be seen in the evolution of UK macroeconomic policy during the 1970s. Like many nations across the global capitalism system, the UK economy entered recession between 1973 and 1975, with government borrowing and public sector debt, which had already been elevated by the Heath government in the summer of 1971 to promote economic growth, ballooning even further. Denis Healey, Chancellor of the Exchequer (1974–1979), originally introduced a Keynesian response to this economic crisis in his 1974 Budget, increasing public spending as a means to stimulate economic growth. Several months later, however, in his 1975 Budget Statement, Healey essentially reversed this position, ending the Keynesian approach to macroeconomic policy that had dominated the post-war period by prioritising the macroeconomic objective of defeating inflation over that of promoting full employment (Jessop, 2017, p. 135; Silverwood, 2015). Later, the need to secure emergency liquidity from the International Monetary Fund in 1976 to fund the UK's disequilibria in her balance of payments was a cause of deep embarrassment to the Callaghan government and required them to make deep cuts in public spending. The Ruskin speech is thus posited in some quarters as having been motivated by a cynical desire to distract attention from worsening socio-economic conditions (Jervis, 2011).

This leads us to the fourth motivation advanced in the literature in the form of the 'fiscal crises' explanation. Although international and domestic economic breakdown had a multiplicity of causes (Dell, 1991), some of which are identified above, the crisis was rapidly re-constructed into a fiscal crisis by the New Right eager to fix attention on public expenditure and government borrowing. In turn, this allowed the Conservative opposition under Margaret Thatcher to argue that the UK economy was 'over-governed, over-spent, over-taxed' (Joseph, 1976). Twin motivations behind the Ruskin Speech are advanced under the fiscal crisis explanation, with Hickson and Miles (2020) noting that Callaghan's arrival at Ruskin College was marred by protests regarding underfunding within education. First, the speech is seen as an attempt by Callaghan to defend public expenditure by ensuring that educational resources were used more effectively (Chitty, 1998, p. 320). Second, it has been cast as a cynical response to provide cover for cuts to public expenditure in education (Ginsburg et al., 1979).

SOME NOTES ON RESEARCH DESIGN

One of the claimed contributions to literature advanced in this paper is methodological. In this paper, documentary analysis of archival materials held in the National Archives, Kew Gardens, London, is elevated as our primary method of data collection. Although much existing literature on the subject of UK educational policymaking has made ample use of publicly

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available government documentation to engage in documentary analysis, the use of archival material produced by central government remains under-utilised. Indeed, an extensive literature review conducted by the authors found only one other example of data collection on UK educational policymaking conducted from such archival materials in the form of an unpublished thesis (Jervis, 2011). This neglect of archival material produced by central government might be considered surprising. For instance, Punch (2014, pp. 158–159) notes that the development of social science as an academic discipline depended greatly on documentary analysis of publicly held records such as those found in such archives.

Our research design followed the historical method advanced by luminaries such as Leopold von Ranke (1790–1886) and Barbara Tuchman (1912–1989). The aim of this method is to describe history 'as it really happened', or perhaps more accurately, 'how it essentially was'. This is achieved through stringent source selection, with historical enquiry prioritising primary sources that were 'the direct outcomes of historical events or experiences', principally original documentation and eyewitness testimony. Original documentation includes items such as 'memoirs, letters, diaries and minutes' of the type often 'systematized in national archives'. It been posited that 'serious research into international events must include visits to such archives'. Meanwhile, eyewitness testimony includes data generated through interviews, surveys or questionnaires of participants in historical events. Where secondary sources are utilised by the historian, prioritisation should be given to those themselves based upon primary sources, with a healthy scepticism retained that secondary sources are at one remove from the historical event under scrutiny, making them by their very nature less trustworthy (Moses & Knutsen, 2012, pp. 121–131).

To those who have questioned this historical method, specifically the utility of original documentation held in the National Archives (Ball, 1995; Booth & Glynn, 1979), Lowe (1997, p. 240) countered that 'the simple fact … is that there is no more important single archive' than that held in the Public Records Office (National Archives, Kew Gardens, London) when conducting historical study of public policymaking in the UK. This is because, according to Lowe (1997, pp. 240–241), original documents held in the National Archives 'provide a correction to conclusions derived from published and oral evidence', enabling us to get to the heart of explaining history 'as it really happened' or 'how it essentially was'.

Lowe (1997, p. 241) further advocated archival research as a means to deliver 'greater contextualization and balance' into historical studies of policymaking. This was something Lowe claimed as 'a vital counterweight to an inherent danger in all contemporary history: the "tyranny" of relevance or the seeking—and recognition—in the past of that which is relevant to the present'. Consequently, archival research helps us to identify 'the phenomenon, too often ignored by historians, that the impact of policy frequently bears little relation to the intentions of the "core executive"' (Lowe, 1997, p. 242). Both accusations that might be levelled at those literatures, such as those delineated in the introduction to this paper, that portray the Ruskin speech as a 'tipping' or 'turning' point in the contemporary history of the English education system, sometimes without proper exploration of the specific causal mechanism between the two events.

Despite the strengths of archival research in historiography, no method of data collection is ever without limitations. Lowe (1997, p. 241) identified some himself, including that archival records might be incomplete and 'deliberately reflect constitutional propriety rather than actual practice'. Furthermore, Lowe (1997, p. 248) asserted that public records are 'not neutral … rather they are the working papers of government. Thus as a policy decision evolves it is inevitable that both the range of information deployed and the personal views expressed will become increasingly restricted.'

Limitations extend to those original documents from which data have been collected for this paper. For example, Lowe (1997, p. 250) records that Cabinet minutes were 'essentially a mechanism which the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer … informed

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the rest of Whitehall of what, and only of what, they wanted them to know'. Although, given that the intention of this paper is to ascertain the motivation of the Prime Minister, James Callaghan, to deliver his intervention on education at Ruskin College in October 1976, this objection is perhaps less troublesome in our narrow context. Elsewhere, we are on safer grounds in our examination of the Prime Minister's papers, which reveal 'what the Prime Minister was and was not interested in, as well as some of his innermost thoughts', although even here 'given that the Prime Minister was most likely to work through informal conferences, committees and interviews … the papers can give a misleading impression of the Prime Minister's role and influence' (Lowe, 1997, p. 253).

In the proceeding section, we will critically examine the motivations behind the Ruskin Speech advanced in the existing literature against the data collected from archival material. In acknowledgement of such limitations in archival materials, the advice that research findings generated through such methods should not be taken for granted and should be triangulated where possible was heeded (May, 2011, p. 204; Punch, 2014, p. 159). Naturally, therefore, we also consulted a host of further primary and secondary sources beyond those located in the National Archives (Flick, 2018, p. 191). In accordance with the demands placed upon us by the historical method, triangulation from other primary sources, especially the diaries and autobiographies of those involved in educational policymaking between 1976 and 1979, as well their speeches and interventions in debates delivered in the House of Commons over the same period, were prioritised. More limited data were also collected from close reading of the wealth of secondary sources written on the subject. Here, we were at a certain advantage in that many of these publications had themselves generated data from primary sources, not only eyewitness testimony or through interview, but also documentary analysis of departmental papers and the speeches of government ministers. Nevertheless, as again demanded by the historical method, we maintained a healthy scepticism remembering that these sources placed us at one remove from the primary source material.

We considered collecting data through elite interview but rejected such an approach on two grounds, the sad truth being that, with the passage of time, our research design is probably the only way that remains available to engage in fresh historical study of educational policymaking in the UK during the period in question. Key personalities involved in educational policymaking in the period, such as James Callaghan (1912–2005), Shirley Williams (1930–2021) and Fred Mulley (1918–1995) have all now sadly passed away. Others like Bernard Donoughue remain alive, but there are ethical considerations involved in interviewing those who have reached such advanced age.

Even where extensive elite interviews to gather eyewitness testimony on the subject might have been possible, we nevertheless rejected the approach on the following grounds. Principally, the limitations involved in collecting data through elite interviews in our case were exacerbated by the limited number of personalities left who could be interviewed. This gave rise to a significant risk of sampling error (Moses & Knutsen, 2012, p. 131). Another problem with adopting elite interviews as our method of data collection would be that our conversation with policymakers would be taking place long after the events in question and with elderly participants. This would exacerbate a problem inherent with all interviews, the fallibility of memory (Walliman, 2016, p. 130). As a consequence, incorporating elite interviews into our research design would have raised questions of reliability and validity (Barbour & Schostak, 2011, pp. 61–63; Elliott, 2013, pp. 22–28; Moses & Knutsen, 2012, p. 132). Indeed, these are two problems facing interview as a data collection method more generally. Focusing purely on the issue of validity, for instance, it is well known that the interviewee 'never simply reports of experiences, rather they make sense of and therefore inevitably distort those experiences' (Elliott, 2013, p. 23). Moreover, it should be remembered that the interviewee might seek to convey 'justification' or 'excuses' for their actions (May, 2011, p. 155).

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Consequently, the 'link between a person's account of an action and the action itself cannot be made' automatically (May, 2011, p. 157).

THE DEFENCE OF COMPREHENSIVE EDUCATION

The main source of evidence for the 'fiscal crises' explanation of motivation would appear to lie within the Ruskin speech itself. Callaghan (1976b) stated as a justification for his intervention on educational matters that 'there has been a massive injection of resources into education, mainly to meet increased numbers and partly to raise standards. But in present circumstances there can be little expectation of further increased resources being made available, at any rate for the time being'. The scale of public expenditure was subsequently mentioned by Callaghan in the House of Commons as part of the reason for the need for educational reform (Hansard, 1976a).

There is little evidence, however, from our archival research to support the 'fiscal crises' explanation of motivation for the Ruskin Speech. A memorandum produced by the Cabinet Office for the Prime Minister on 14 May 1976 did identify public expenditure as a major issue affecting education (Prime Minister's Office, 1976a), but the notes of the meeting between Callaghan and Fred Mulley (Secretary of State for DES, 1975–1976) that took place on 21 May 1976 cast a different light. The official record of the meeting noting that, although Callaghan made it clear there would no new fiscal resources available for educational spending, and that 'he would not hesitate to [publicly] expose … money constraints' faced by the sector, fiscal issues were 'not the essence of the problem' in education (Prime Minister's Office, 1976c). Neither did fiscal problems loom large in any of the autobiographies, memoirs or diaries of those involved with educational policymaking at the time (see Benn, 1989, pp. 426, 598). Donoughue (Donoughue, 1987, Chapter 4), for instance, devoted an entire chapter to the fiscal crisis associated with the International Monetary Fund, which prompted draconian cuts to public expenditure, and did not mention education once.

Similarly, there is little support for the 'international political' explanation, with international economic dislocation receiving only one oblique mention in the archival material. This was in a letter sent by Donoughue to Callaghan on 17 June 1977 discussing the proposed green paper on education that would culminate the Great Debate. The letter stated that the green paper should include 'a clear statement that such difficulties we face, flow from modern social and economic arrangements, and not from our particular education system' (Prime Minister's Office, 1977a). Donoughue (1987, pp. 57–59, 79–102) did note, in a subsequent diary entry, how the Callaghan government was distracted by the major political and socio-economic events of the period, including the 1976 International Monetary Fund Crisis, but does not cite such events as a motivation for the Ruskin speech.

No evidence exists in the archival material to suggest that Callaghan's social class was a significant motivator behind the Ruskin speech. This was surprising because, as identified in a previous section of the paper, documentary analysis of the autobiographies and diaries of those involved in educational policymaking in the period suggests that social class was a strong motivation for Callaghan's intervention into education in his Ruskin speech (Callaghan, 1987; Donoughue, 1987, 2003, 2008; Williams, 2010).

It is beholden upon us consequently to remind the reader about possible limitations of our research method, an issue we originally explored in the methodology section of the paper. A potential explanation for the absence of evidence for the social class explanation is the nature of archival material, with such a sensitive and personal motivation not necessarily being recorded by internal records and memoranda. Such documentation is unlikely to ever provide evidence of a Prime Minister's deepest insecurities and fears, and this may provide

an explanation for why no evidence could be found in support of the social class explanation within the archival material.

Where the archival evidence is most persuasive then is in its support for the explanation that the motivation for the Ruskin speech arose from domestic political factors. The previously mentioned memorandum of 14 May 1976 noted that ‘there is now evidence of a good deal of public concern about secondary schools and this is not confined to the anti-comprehensive lobby’ (Prime Minister's Office, 1976a). This was followed by a further memorandum 4 days later that questioned ‘whether or not illiteracy is increasing … there is certainly widespread dissatisfaction with education standards’ (Prime Minister's Office, 1976b). This filtered through into a meeting attended by the Cabinet on 24 May 1976 in which Callaghan stated that, in order to win the next election, it was necessary for the Labour Party to focus on the issues that ‘people really cared about’, especially their ‘priorities in education and training, in relation both to children leaving school with no qualification and no prospect of further training’, but also ‘in relation to the teaching of the basic skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic’ (Prime Minister's Office, 1976e).

Archival material suggests an evident desire to address parental apprehension about standards, at least in part out of concern for the future political prospects of the Labour Party at the next general election. We found no evidence, however, to suggest that the Ruskin Speech or subsequent Great Debate were inspired by more radical visions for the reform of education. For example, the archival material provided no evidence that the structure and underlying ethos of comprehensive education were up for debate (Hickson & Miles, 2020). Parental anxieties were consequently noted, but dismissed as being ‘more interested in the content of education, including the curriculum, than in any other aspect’ (Prime Minister's Office, 1976a), the ‘primary concerns of parents [being] … not about the overall organisation of the school system but rather with what their children are taught, with how they are taught it, and with whether a sense of discipline and responsibility is inculcated’ (Prime Minister's Office, 1976b). Consequently, in his meeting with Mulley on 21 May 1976, Callaghan was recorded as stating that although his government should act upon public concerns, ‘the main problem was what to do about the content of education. The comprehensive argument was over, but there was a general worry about the quality of education with the comprehensive system.’ Mulley was in full agreement, stating that ‘although he had no doubt it was right to abolish selective examinations and go comprehensive, there had been a consequent fall in standards which was serious’ (Prime Minister's Office, 1976c).

Lesser commented upon aspects of Callaghan's (1976b) Ruskin speech support analysis that a motivation for his intervention into educational matters was to defend comprehensive education. Callaghan stated in his speech that education was a ‘traditional concern of the whole Labour movement’, which has ‘always cherished education: free education, comprehensive education, adult education. Education for life.’ Continuing further, Callaghan framed his intervention as coming to the defence of comprehensive education from ‘Black Paper prejudices … who claim to defend standards but who in reality are simply seeking to defend old privileges and inequalities’. To save comprehensive education from those who would abandon it, educational reform was necessary to ‘equip children to the best of their ability for a lively, constructive, place in society, and also to fit them to do a job of work’. There was no virtue, Callaghan asserted, ‘in producing socially well-adjusted members of society who are unemployed because they do not have the skills … nor at the other extreme must they be technically efficient robots’. Callaghan concluded that ‘if the public is not convinced, then the profession will be laying up trouble for itself in the future’ and it would have been a ‘betrayal of that concern if I had not drawn problems to your attention and put to you specifically some of the challenges which we have to face’.

That proposed educational change were limited to those compatible with comprehensive education was certainly the remembrance of Bernard Donoughue. Writing a year before the

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1988 Education Act, Donoughue (1987, p. 113) accepts that although the 'Ruskin speech became the Whitehall blueprint for what Sir Keith Joseph later attempted, and partially achieved, under Mrs Thatcher's subsequent administration', he argues that Conservative reform came 'from quite different motives'. The 'basic principle' of the Ruskin Speech, and the Great Debate that followed, according to Donoughue (1987, pp. 111–113; 2003, p. 2 81; 2008, p. 84), was to improve 'the quality as opposed to the quantity of education at a time when resources were constrained'. What was not at issue was the 'ideological structure of the system', which needed to be continued to be delivered out of concern for the 'educationally underprivileged' and the 'inequality of education available to Britain's youth', with 'standards, basic numeracy and literacy skills and the need for more technical, vocational and adult education' improved (Donoughue, 2003, pp. 279–280). According to Donoughue (1987, p. 109) the 'majority of the public (were) … content with the basic structure of education as had been established through the introduction of the comprehensive system'.

Further evidence for the assertion that Callaghan was motivated by concern to defend comprehensive education was found within archival materials in the discussion about the potential future legislative outcome of the Ruskin Speech and Great Debate. Indeed, in his original meeting with Fred Mulley on 21 May, which had set events in motion, Callaghan made it clear that there was no room in the parliamentary timetable to introduce any new educational legislation arising from the aftermath of their conversation (Prime Minister's Office, 1976c). Later, in a letter to Shirley Williams on 22 November 1976, after the Ruskin Speech but before the Great Debate had properly swung into action, Callaghan noted his concern for political considerations emanating from the Great Debate stating that the timetable of events proposed by the DES 'risks an unnecessary dissipation of the favourable effect which our proposals should have upon the public'. This letter also stated Callaghan's strong preference that the Great Debate should culminate with a green paper as this was the 'form of presentation which is likely to maximize public interest' (Prime Minister's Office, 1976h). Within the UK legislative procedure, a green paper is a document that provides preliminary policy proposals such that conversation and consultation are promoted. It does not commit the government to introduce new legislation.

Callaghan had been stung into this action on the 22 November 1976 after receiving two letters. The first was from Shirley Williams informing him on 12 November 1976 that the DES foresaw the Great Debate being brought to an end with the publication of a green paper in June 1977 (Prime Minister's Office, 1976f). This produced a vociferous response from the Prime Minister's Office, an internal letter dated 15 November 1976 informing Callaghan that the timetable for the Great Debate was 'unnecessarily protracted … to put it crudely we think that the rats have been getting at your initiative'. Defending her corner, Williams responded with a letter of her own on 6 December 1976 rejecting the idea that the Great Debate might be speeded up such that a green paper might be published early on the ground that it would lose the goodwill of participants (Prime Minister's Office, 1976i). This was accepted by the Prime Minister's Office (1976j) 4 days later in letter to the DES, but in a further indication of the importance placed on the politics of the Great Debate, it was given with the hope attached that 'the January consultative paper' set to be published the following year 'will be somewhat more substantial than Mrs. Williams envisages and that it will make more public impact than the annotated agenda published on 16 November'.

Keeping to her word, Williams and the DES presented a green paper to the Prime Minister's Office in time for publication in June 1977. In response to the draft, the Prime Minister's Office (1977a) articulated to the DES on behalf of Callaghan, in a letter on 1 June, his worry that the first draft did not appropriately articulate 'much about the relationships between school and industry' and 'there is no mention of the core curriculum'. Further criticism would arrive from other directions. The Prime Minister's Office (1977b, 1977c) later the same month suggested

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that the draft green paper was deficient in its lack of 'strong reaffirmation of the comprehensive principle'. Reinforced by similar advice from the Home and Social Affairs Committee, the DES would subsequently place such an affirmation on page one of its green paper—'Education in Schools: A Consultative Document' (Cabinet Office, 1977; HM Government, 1977).

The concerns of the Prime Minister's Office were evidently placated by later drafts of the green paper produced by the DES. Internal documentation to the Prime Minister's Office (1977d) dated 1 July showed Callaghan's hand-written notes in the margin stating that 'this draft is much better—it is worthy of the Great Debate—it reflects what was said. It should go to Cabinet in any case'. Further indicative of the important domestic political function which the Ruskin Speech and Great Debate were serving the Callaghan administration, a letter from Bernard Donoughue to the Prime Minister on 6 July read that the 'new draft is much more satisfactory … it now reads extremely well … the new structure picks up very well the points, questions and themes of your Ruskin Speech and the Great Debate … it no longer seems to fudge the issues of main public concern' (Prime Minister's Office, 1977e). A day later, Callaghan would congratulate Williams in a Cabinet meeting, praising her for a 'good paper, worthy of the public debate which had so far taken place on education in schools' (Cabinet Office, 1977a).

A final addendum to the narrative emerging from archival material, delivering further evidence of the political purpose which the Ruskin Speech and Great Debate served the Callaghan administration, occurred after the publication of the green paper. Writing to the Prime Minister on 31 July 1978, Williams proposed publishing a white paper on education drawing 'attention to the government's record … picking up some of the themes of the Great Debate on education', the 'other main purpose' being to 'serve as a prospectus for the educational legislation proposed for next session'. White papers within UK legislative procedure outline a government's firm proposals for future changes in law and policy to be enacted through bills laid before parliaments. In response, Callaghan stated that he wanted to 'reserve judgement' (Prime Minister's Office, 1978a), but only a day later (1 August 1978) the Prime Minister's Office (1978b) worried that it would 'contain no decisions in light of the Great Debate' and 'risk striking a more complacent note … than the green paper … particularly as regards the curriculum and methods of teaching'. Another day later (2nd August 1978), the Home Secretary, Merlyn Rees, wrote to the Prime Minister to advise that the DES proposals for a white paper be watered down to one that reflected the actions on education already taken by the government, rather than plans for future legislation. In hand-written notes, Callaghan wrote that he wanted to see any drafts of this more informal paper 'in time to stop it without embarrassment' (Prime Minister's Office, 1978c).

A consequence of our archival analysis, in our judgement, is that the domestic political explanation regarding the motivation behind the Ruskin Speech and Great Debate needs slight nuance. Both events were more than an attempt to deflect media criticisms of education or merely to alter public perceptions enough to win a future general election (although this did play a part). Such motivations are imbued with a negative, and even cynical, hue. Our examination suggests a more positive 'spin' on the motivation behind the Ruskin speech and subsequent Great Debate. At the fundamental level, archival analysis appears to support the conclusion that both these events were inspired in support and defence of the comprehensive ideal of education. We found no evidence to suggest that the motivation was to trigger a more thorough-going and substantial and radical reform of education away from such principles.

Indeed, sometimes lost in the myopic focus on the Ruskin speech and Great Debate in historical educational studies of the period is that 1976 also saw an Education Act passed in parliament, establishing the general principle for the first time that education should be provided *only* in schools that did not admit pupils by selection. The 1976 Education Act gave the Secretary of State increased powers to compel local education authorities to prepare and submit proposals to apply the principle in their jurisdiction—a power that Williams was more than eager to use (Hansard, 1976b, 1977a, 1977b, 1977c, 1977d, 1978a, 1978b, 1978c).

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CONCLUSION

As we approach its fiftieth anniversary, it is clear that Callaghan's Ruskin Speech remains an important event within English education. Successive governments have cited it as an influence on their own educational reform and much of its content, such as the need for a universal curriculum, a centralised inspection body, the ongoing discussion of 'correct' teaching methods and the linking of education to the needs of industry, remains dominant issues within educational debates in the contemporary period (Jenkins, 2022).

Given the continued significance of these debates, it is easy to cast the original speech as a seismic event that sought to redefine educational policy and catapult it in the direction of the contemporary educational system in England. However, prioritising the documentary analysis of archival material produced by the British central government, our research suggests a very different motivation behind the Ruskin speech. The conclusion reached is that the motivation for the Ruskin speech stems significantly from (what we term) 'domestic political' factors with one important caveat, that is that the existing explanation of this motivation should be slightly nuanced to incorporate our research finding such that it is emphasises that a significant motivation behind Ruskin was to provide support and defence of the comprehensive educational system such that it could prosper into the future.

In coming to this conclusion, we must also consider the fragility inherent in any research method. No method of data collection is foolproof and archival research is no different. Where possible, the paper has sought to mitigate any weaknesses from this research method by triangulating the data collected from archival material against other primary literature (and more limited data collection from secondary sources), but it has to be accepted that this mitigation will not ensure that the research design is wholly without limitation. In one specific instance, in regard to the 'social class' explanation of the motivation behind the Ruskin speech, we remind the reader of a potential limitation in our research finding. No evidence to support the social class explanation could be found in the archival material, but this most likely because of the nature of the archival material itself, rather than because Callaghan's class background played no part in his motivation. Indeed, that Callaghan himself, and those closest around him during his stint as Prime Minister, note his class background as a motivation in their various autobiographies and diaries must attest to its importance. Here, we remind the reader that archival material, such as that we consulted in the National Archives, comprises official records of meetings and internal correspondence. They are unlikely to ever provide evidence of a Prime Minister's deepest insecurities and fears.

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ORCID

James Silverwood https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5954-887X
Peter Wolstencroft https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2867-8900

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