

THE SECONDARY MOD

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PROLOGUE

When I told friends about *The Secondary Mod* their first comment was, ‘But you vowed never to write another book’, closely followed by, ‘What does Stella [my wife] think?’ Only then did they enquire what it’s about and why I was breaking my ‘I am finished with writing books’ vow.

In the past I have always known the scope of the topics I wanted my books to cover and what I hoped to achieve from writing them. Normally it was to support some new business venture.

My first book documented the transformative effect of the internet on business and society. Most recently I have written about population ageing and its effects on business and society.

Everything about *The Secondary Mod* was different. Before beginning I had planned less than half of the content and done less than 20% of the research, and had only the sketchiest idea about the conclusions. As for why I was writing the book, the answer was complicated and not a set of reasons that makes for a single, pithy sentence. To be honest, I am not sure I fully understood all the reasons myself. Financial gain certainly wasn’t one of them.

Let me try and explain. For the past decade, probably longer, I have had a low-grade irritation about the way that secondary modern schools are

discussed. They are invariably referred to as the inevitable (and unwanted) result of educating a minority of children in grammar schools.

It is like the subject of positive discrimination. Any mention of its benefits is immediately countered by arguments about the negative outcomes and unfairness for those it penalises. This might be a valid argument, but it polarises any debate into a simplistic argument about ‘winners’ and ‘losers’. It is the ‘zero-sum game’ argument of game theory in which one person’s gain is equivalent to another’s loss.

Secondary modern schools and the millions of children who attended them are always described as the ‘losers’ who were sacrificed for the minority of ‘winners’ attending grammar schools. The ‘winners’, allegedly, got the better teachers and school facilities and had the expectation of success. The implicit assertion, which is sometimes made explicit, is that secondary modern children had a second-rate education that limited them to second-rate life chances.

These schools are now a footnote in the history of British secondary education. They were last counted in government education statistics in 2011, when there were 137 remaining. The intervening years have done nothing to improve their reputation.

If you want to silence a debate about selective schools, then look thoughtful and say the magic words, ‘But look at the unfairness of secondary moderns.’ Your audience is likely to nod in approval while concocting their own interpretation of the statement usually focusing on failure, poor teaching, unfairness, scarred for life, second-class citizens etc.

This simplistic dismissal of the schooling system that educated the majority of children for 23 years always annoys me. Let’s be frank – it pisses me off.

I went to a secondary modern and it was nothing like this received wisdom. Don’t worry – this is not going to be a tale about how I fought against the odds to succeed. I have recounted my personal experiences, only because I know the facts are accurate, thanks to my parents who dutifully kept all my school records.

I think that this disconnect between my experience and the universally accepted story of the awfulness of secondary modern schools was what made me write this book. Perhaps it is even more of a personal mission, to

provide a balanced story for the sake of the teachers and headmaster to whom I owe such a debt of gratitude.

However, it was also at this point that my uncertainty about the book's content began. Maybe I was blessed with a one-off secondary modern experience, and maybe the criticisms of the schools were correct. I found that difficult to believe, but it was a possibility that I couldn't discount. Only by doing a lot of research would I know the answer. For an author, this uncertainty was both daunting and exciting, and it's not something I had experienced before. I hope you, the reader, are comfortable with a book whose storyline evolved as the writing progressed.

My best attempt at a single-sentence description of the book goes something like this: 'It is the story of secondary modern schools in England and Wales based on facts, not prejudice.' My motivation for writing it, other than as a token of thanks to my teachers, was to provide an alternative narrative to the establishment's simplistic notion that these schools were a scar on the country's educational history. However, I had to be prepared for the possibility that the establishment's view was correct.

I was on much firmer foundations in knowing what *The Secondary Mod* was not about. It is not a defence of selective education and a diatribe about bringing back grammar schools. Neither is it a commentary on teaching techniques and schools' curriculum. Above all, it is not a chronicle about the 'good old days' of schooling and an attack on all that is wrong with today's way of educating the young. It touches on these topics, of course, but they were not my primary interest.

A cursory study of the subject reveals that many of the arguments against secondary moderns are either rehashed versions of previous critical reporting or based on the selective use of information. I can easily recognise these mistakes, having made them myself on an embarrassingly large number of occasions. I did my very best not to repeat the error.

To help me avoid this problem and as a prism to illustrate how others have fallen into the trap, I start by explaining how individual and collective views about events and subjects become distorted by the selective filtering of information. I researched and wrote this book at the height of 'fake news' hysteria and witnessing the media reporting of events polarising in an extraordinary way. This was the time of Brexit, Donald Trump and Covid-19.

If we can create such differing views about what is happening today – just think of how we might distort the truth about events that occurred over half a century ago?

The story begins with an account of my own experience of failing the 11-plus and finding myself at George Gascoigne, a secondary modern in East London. I had assumed that this chapter would be easy to write, but it proved surprisingly difficult. Memories that had always seemed crystal clear become distinctly fuzzy when you try to summarise them into a succinct readable form. I had always been immensely grateful to my teachers and writing this section made me even more so, having studied the difficulties they overcame to give us a good education.

Next I look at the most common stories about the 11-plus and what happened to those who failed the exam. I think the technical term for this is the ‘dominant narrative’. I was astonished at how often the subject is still discussed by politicians, media commentators, academics and ‘celebrities’. In almost all cases their views are negative and worryingly consistent. This section concludes with a summary of the most common arguments and ‘facts’ that are used to damn these schools.

By this stage, you will have read my personal account of attending a secondary modern school and the very different viewpoint given by the media and the self-appointed commentators about education history. So, what is the truth? The only way to answer this question was to look at the evidence. I began by thinking this could be found from reading the books that have been written about the schools, supplemented by academic papers. How wrong and naïve I was. Most of what I read was variations on the dominant narrative with little objective thinking and would have resulted in me compounding the error of simplifying the story of the schools. To do the job properly I needed to access the original sources of information – the numerous government reports, papers and acts. This involved many visits to the National Archive.

When I began, I thought I was writing a critical appraisal of the history of secondary moderns. I concluded by writing both the appraisal and their history, which stretches from the First World War (WWI) to the early 2000s. For readers with only a peripheral interest in their plight, Chapter 4 (‘A condensed history of secondary moderns’) provides an overview of the char-

acters, politics and economic and social changes that determined the type and quality of children's education.

I am not a historian, nor do I have a background in education (other than having been a child). But, I am somebody who has spent most of their life needing to understand new subjects rapidly, to extract the salient facts and then to make decisions and recommendations. A cursory look at the subject revealed that recounting its history could become a story about the succession of Parliamentary committees and reports that shaped the schooling system. Obviously, the top-down decisions about the organisation of schooling are important, but I have no reason to believe that those responsible for delivering education back then paid any more attention to government diktats than they do now. I did my best to assemble the facts of what actually happened and to review the results in the context of the time, not through today's eyes. Above all I tried to suspend my own prejudices and to tell the story as it was, not how I would have liked it to be.

Although it is much shorter than the history, Chapter 8 ('Much maligned or monstrous mistake?') is the crux of the book. Having understood why secondary moderns are portrayed as being such a mistake and then having created my own account of their story, I was able to answer – well, attempt to answer – the question posed in the chapter's title. When I began I had no idea what those conclusions would be. My instinct was that 'much maligned' was a more likely outcome than 'monstrous mistake'. As you might guess, there was not a black-and-white conclusion but one that contained lots of shades of grey.

The final chapter of the book, 'Half a century on – what lessons can we learn?', does exactly 'what it says on the tin'. Having been immersed in reading and thinking about the subject, I have formed some strong opinions. I have had the luxury of travelling through the history of a subject, seeing educational policies created and implemented, and picking over their resulting successes and failures. With depressing regularity the same mistakes kept being made. Each new generation of politicians was certain they had the solution to their predecessors' problems. Sometimes they had; more often their dreams ended in failure.

I don't think for an instant that I have the answers to these perennial problems, but I know that repeating the same flawed solutions and expecting the results to be different doesn't work. Hopefully by describing the deep-

seated weaknesses in the political administrative system that determines and implements education policy I have shed some light on what needs to change.

In my last book (*This I Know*¹) the context was a train journey in which I met the reader and explained, in a couple of hours, the fundamentals of a subject on which I am something of an expert. I think the context of *The Secondary Mod* is also a journey, but it's a much longer one – more a voyage of discovery. We start during WWI and end during Tony Blair's second term as prime minister. Along the way I find the answers to my questions about secondary moderns but discover much, much more that is relevant to today's school children.

1. *This I Know*, Kindle Direct Publishing, 2017.